

# *Bound*



By #1 Bestselling Author  
R.M. ArceJaeger

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**A Merged Fairytale of  
Beauty and the Beast & Sleeping Beauty**



R.M. ArceJaeger

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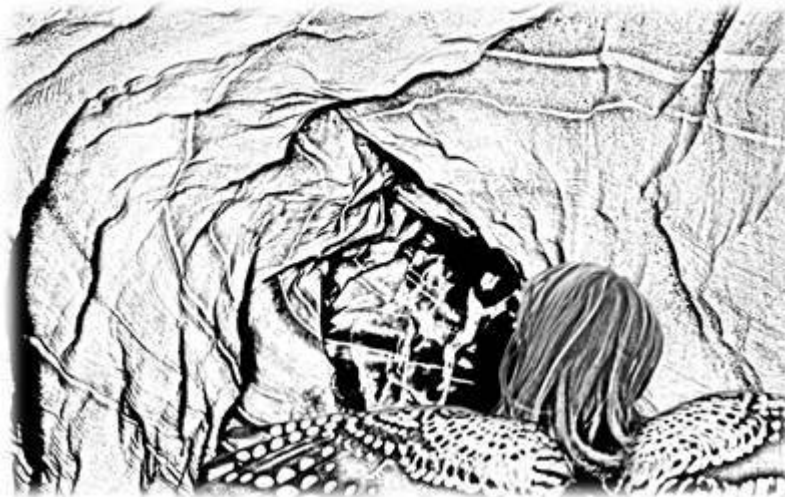
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## PROLOGUE



LILIATH EDGED HER WAY slowly across the thin sandstone ledge, creeping toward the opening in the canyon wall as silently as she could. Every few seconds, she would freeze in place—listening for whether her presence had been discovered. Everything was silent, however, except for the thin whistling of the wind through the gorge and the small tinkering sounds seeping out through the rift in the rock.

She had been forced to wait three months before searching out the ghastly's lair—three months for her magic to renew itself enough to be useful should it come to a fight. Other fairies would have needed a full year to recover their power after expending it on a spell, but Liliath was not like other fairies.

A gust of wind blew through the canyon, and Liliath extended her wings slightly to help keep her balance on the narrow ledge. Strong and able, her wings were as long as her body and patterned with the brown, downy feathers of a kestrel. Liliath could have easily flown to the fissure that was the entrance to the ghastly's den, but the sound of her wing beats would have echoed loudly in the narrow canyon, and she did not want to announce her presence to her enemy until the last possible moment.

“Are you going to come inside or not?” a crackling voice called out from within the rock, startling Liliath and causing her to take an injudicious step back. The edge of the ledge crumbled slightly under her foot, and she had to flap her wings furiously to restore her balance.

“Well?” the voice chided. “Either come inside or go away.”

Liliath scowled. *How did she know I was here?* she wondered angrily.

Reaching into the sack at her waist, the young fairy pulled out the Focuser and gripped it tightly in one hand. The relic had been passed down through her family for generations, and she had reasoned she was merely making an early claim on her inheritance the night she had pilfered it from her parents’ memory chest and left to seek out the ghastly. Though Liliath was an Aerie and thus already more powerful than any other living fairy, the Focuser would magnify her magic a hundred times more, making it an invaluable asset when she finally confronted her foe.

Liliath mentally rehearsed the spell she would use if the creature tried to attack. True, she had lost the element of surprise, but the ghastly could not match Liliath’s power. She would not abandon her quest.

Taking a deep breath, Liliath thrust herself off the ledge and swooped swiftly down through the rift.

Nothing happened.

She was standing in a large hollow in the cliff rock. Two torches burned hazily on opposite walls, their flames illuminating a small cave with several tunnels branching away into darkness. The ghastly stood at the far side of the chamber—her back was to Liliath, and she was poring over a book that lay on a sandstone ledge. Other books were stacked nearby in neat piles, along with pieces of parchment and a cluster of quills. The ordered simplicity of the room shocked Liliath, who had been expecting a den of bones at the very least.

“Well, girl, did you come all this way just to gawk?” the ghastly spoke without looking up, “or did you have a better purpose in seeking out my lair?”

Liliath’s eyes narrowed. “What do you think?”

The ghastly turned around.

Liliath had been only a small child the last time she had seen Moraga, but she had thought her recollection of the loathsome ghastly was crystal clear. Now, she saw just how inadequate that memory had been.

Matted black hair liberally streaked with gray coursed down Moraga's shoulders in a mass of grimy tangles. The ghastly's leathery skin was pockmarked and glowed greyish-green in the torchlight. Her body appeared oddly jointed, and her fingers curved like claws, ending in sharp, black nails. The tendons in her arms and neck jutted out clearly against her skin, and as she smiled at Liliath, the girl saw her facial features were all slightly warped—one eye lower than the other, a nose flatter than normal, and overfull lips that stretched across two rows of rotting teeth. It was the wings, though, that disturbed Liliath the most. Moraga's wings were shaped like a bat's, but while Liliath and her family all had wings like a bird's, the mere fact that Moraga could fly was an unwelcome reminder that ghastlies and fairies shared a common ancestry.

*She is not my relation—she is the creature who cursed my best friend,* Liliath asserted. She stared boldly at Moraga, who stared back with piercing silver eyes—the only part of the ghastly that seemed alive. Suddenly, Moraga gave a dry, knowing laugh.

“Yes, you have a purpose,” she crooned. “Innocent little child. You want me to break the curse.”

“I am not a child!” Liliath snapped. “I am sixteen years old, and you *will* break Ari's curse!”

“Will I?” the ghastly seemed amused.

Anger burned within Liliath—*how dare she laugh at me?*—and she held the Focuser high.

“Put that away, child. You dare not harm me—not if you want what you came here for. Besides, I am rather inclined to help you.”

“You *what?*”

Liliath mind reeled. The ghastly—willing to help her? That made no sense! In fact, nothing about this encounter so far made sense.

“To be sure,” Moraga continued, “I was rather . . . perturbed to learn that you had managed to alter my curse. Twenty-one years spent plotting revenge, only to have it be thwarted by you—a mere child! Not that eternal sleep was much of an improvement, but still, it was the principal that mattered. You interfered with my spell, and the last person who did that got turned into a beast.”

*Ari!*

Almost as though she had heard Liliath's mental cry, the ghastly continued, “Yes, your prince paid quite the consequence—and now you

seek to break his spell. How quaint. Too bad that spells are permanent . . . unless, of course, they are cast with Old Magic. But fairies and ghashlies do not have Old Magic anymore. How unfortunate,” taunted Moraga.

“You lie! Ari’s spell *can* be broken,” Liliath snapped.

Moraga smirked. “It can indeed—but only because *you*, Aerie child, were born with the ancient power. You used Old Magic when you distorted my curse. Even so, it can only be removed if you meet the right conditions.”

“What conditions? Tell me!” Liliath demanded.

“No one knows, do they?” the ghashly cackled. “It is the spell that decides, not I. You can either spend your life trying to find the right way to shatter it, or you can take advantage of the other property of Old Magic—the one that allows a curse to be lifted at any time by the caster. In other words, by me.”

Liliath glared at the ghashly. “You *know* that is why I have come.”

“Naturally. And like I said, I am rather inclined to help you.”

“You would lift Ari’s curse just like that?” she asked in sheer disbelief.

The ghashly grinned and sauntered toward the young fairy. Liliath held her ground, even though Moraga drew close enough for her to smell her rank breath—like something once sweet gone rancid. “Well, there *are* rules.”

Liliath squared her shoulders. She had promised her friend she would break his curse, and fairies always kept their word. “What do you want?” she demanded.

“Only a little help.”

“I would never help you!”

“Ah, but you will,” Moraga chortled, causing a wave of fetid breath to wash over Liliath, who struggled not to gag. “You see, when your prince interfered with my attempt to curse the princess, he inadvertently became part of my spell. I cannot lift it from him without also lifting my curse from the princess, and that would defeat my purpose.”

“The princess?” Liliath puzzled. “But she died. You carried the baby off and then let her fall from the sky. *You* killed her.”

“Nonsense!” Moraga shook her head, causing black tendrils of hair to whip through the air like striking snakes. “Really, I had so hoped you were smart. Think, girl! My curse said the princess must die on her twenty-first birthday. Not her first. Not her seventh. Her twenty-first. The only reason I kidnapped her in the first place was to stop *you* from interfering with my

spell—though you, meddling child, managed to do that anyway. True, your parents knocked the infant from my arms in their foolish attempt to steal her from me, but the princess survived the fall.”

Liliath was stunned. “Then where is she?”

The ghastly shrugged. “I have not bothered to look. My curse will bring me to her when the time comes, and I have more pressing matters to attend. So do you, now that you are here to help me.”

“Help you? I cannot believe I am even conversing with you!” Liliath shouted, her voice echoing throughout the cave. “You ruined my life! You ruined Ari’s life! Lift the curse or I will . . . I will—”

“And we are back to that again. How disappointing. But it was not *I* who ruined your life—you can thank King Tirell for that. He was the one who exiled your family after all they had done for him. Years of friendship gone just like that!” The ghastly snapped her fingers, and the sound was like the breaking of a wishbone.

Now Liliath did take a step back. “How did you know that?” she faltered.

Moraga shrugged. “We all have our secrets. In time, I may tell you mine. That will depend on you. Or do you not crave revenge for all he has done?”

The ghastly’s shrewd question seared Liliath to the core—because she *did* crave revenge. King Tirell was the reason she had been forced to leave Gurion and grow up in a strange country where she was forbidden to do magic or fly. Liliath could not even return to visit Ari without risking death if she were caught. Yet her trials paled in comparison to her friend’s, who had been condemned to a life of solitude by his own father simply because he had been cursed. Fury at King Tirell ran ever present in Liliath’s veins, and now it surged through her blood like fiery poison. As much as she hated Moraga, she hated the King more and had long ago promised herself that one day, she would make him pay for his actions.

Moraga continued, “And there is King Derik, Ithikor’s heir, whose ancestor tricked ours into trading magic for refuge in his land. His line has exploited our power for so long that we are now but dim shadows of our former selves. Look at us! Practically extinct! How many fairies are there still powerful enough to cast spells? Seven? How many ghastlies? Only one.” Anguish wracked Moraga’s voice, making it crack.



Liliath stared. She had never really thought beyond her own family's misfortune—had never paused to consider the true extent of their race's decline. Yet now that she did, it was all too plain that Moraga spoke the truth.

"You still not have said what you want me to do," she replied at last.

"Help me to restore magic to this land. Help me to resurrect our race."

"Oh, is that all? How noble!" Liliath sneered, unable to believe that a ghastly could have such honorable aims.

Now it was Moraga's turn to react, and the green cast of her face darkened as she flushed. "You think that just because I am unsightly, I am also evil. I am not."

"You are evil! How can you claim otherwise? I was there when you laid down your curse!" Liliath spat.

"All I wanted was vengeance on the one who stole our races' future!" Moraga retorted. Her nostrils flared with emotion, but her next words were calm and earnest. "Still, thanks to you, I have had time to reconsider my plan, and now I want something else. A future. A future for ghashtlies and for fairies both."

Moraga reached out one clawed finger and stroked the side of Liliath's face, making her shudder.

"If you help me, I swear to you that when the time comes, I will lift the curse on your friend. You will have your prince and all that you dream about. You have my word."

Liliath gasped and took another step back, shaken to the core. The word of a ghastly was just as binding as the word of a fairy—to break it would destroy their ability to use magic forever. Liliath's thoughts raced.

*Ari, I gave you my word that I would free you—this may be the only way to do that. You are all that matters to me.*

*I love you.*

She lifted her chin and looked the ghastly straight in the eye.

"What is your plan?"

Moraga smiled.

# CHAPTER ONE



ANDREW FARMER drove his hay cart down the road, unaware that he was the subject of keen scrutiny.

“Too short,” Adara said decisively. “If I am going to marry a man, he must be taller than me.”

“Good luck finding that,” Chase replied, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand and leaving a streak of dirt behind. “You are the tallest girl in town.”

“You are nearly as tall,” Adara shot back.

“Yes, but not nearly so picky,” winked Chase.

“What about Matthew Cooper?” Rose interjected before her sisters could start to bicker. “Helping him make barrels would be better than pulling weeds all day in the hot sun.” She frowned at the undesirables she was uprooting and placed a handful in her basket.

Adara shook her head. "You think he would let a woman help him? Matthew may be handsome, but he is as arrogant as a lord."

"And how many lords do you know?"

"Exactly the same as you. None."

They all laughed.

"Well, what about Michael Tanner? He is certainly tall enough," Chase asked Adara, but Rose contradicted the choice in disgust.

"Not him—he is a beast! I saw him beating his horse the other day for no reason at all," she exclaimed.

"That poor mare," Adara murmured in sympathy, carefully plucking the weeds from among the radishes.

"You mean you actually got close enough to see his horse? Why, Rose! I am surprised the mere sight of the old nag did not frighten you away," Chase teased.

Rose threw a clod of dirt in her sister's direction. "You promised you would not bring that up anymore!"

"How can I help it, Rose? This morning, you were startled by a baby bunny! I think you jumped higher than it did."

"Animals make me nervous, all right?" she defended. "I just prefer they keep their distance."

"You let Pesk get close enough."

They all turned to look at the dog who was sunning himself near the gate.

"Who says I like him near? I named him that for a reason," Rose countered, but she smiled at her pet.

"Look who is coming now," Adara said, shielding her eyes to peer down the road, "Gareth Forge out on another delivery. You will not find anyone better than a blacksmith's son when it comes to muscles," she told Chase, her tone coy. "He would make a good beau for you."

Chase sniffed. "He is an infant—a whole year younger than me! Besides, he is always so dirty."

"Sweet, though," Adara insisted.

"You have him then."

"I can hardly believe a boy exists you do not want to flirt with," Rose interrupted, seizing the opportunity to needle her sister in turn. "You are always *chasing* after them so."

“At least I will not end up an old maid like Adara, here,” Chase countered.

“You are not so young yourself!”

“Twenty-one is *much* older than nineteen. And besides, I *have* a beau.”

“Oh? Who is it this week?”

Rose ceased listening to her sisters’ squabbling, her attention instead on a monarch butterfly that was fluttering amongst the plants. Though animals larger than a rabbit frightened her more than she would ever admit, she adored butterflies, and this one was drifting closer. It settled on a milkweed plant only a couple feet away from Rose, and she carefully scooted over to it, shifting slowly and steadily so as not to frighten the butterfly. Moving so gradually that her hand trembled with the strain, Rose placed one finger next to the butterfly’s legs. The monarch did not move, just flapped its wings slightly to maintain its balance as the leaf dipped beneath her weight. Slowly, ever so slowly, Rose inched her finger forward until it just brushed the butterfly’s feet. To her utter delight, the butterfly climbed on.

“How do you *do* that?” Chase whispered. Both of her sisters had crept up behind her and were peering over her shoulders in wonder.

“Do you really think they used to be fairies?” Rose marveled aloud, her voice barely audible so as not to frighten the monarch. “Little ones, I mean?”

“I am not sure fairies even exist,” Chase remarked.

“I suppose they must,” Adara frowned thoughtfully. “Father says he saw one once when he lived in Nathar, but I do not think any have lived in Darvell for a very long time.”

The butterfly, perhaps bored of its flowerless perch, flapped its wings twice and took off.

“Nathar—that is the country Mother was from. Do you remember her?” Rose asked wistfully, turning around to regard her sisters. Even though she had asked the same question many times throughout her sixteen years, she always craved the answer as if it were the first.

Adara nodded—she understood well her sister’s desire to know about their mother. “I remember some. She looked a lot like Chase—tall, with coppery hair that reminded me of fire. I used to wish mine looked like hers instead of brown like Father’s. Her eyes were blue like yours, and they shone with dazzling energy. They twinkled like stars in the candlelight when she would kiss me goodnight.”

“That is about all I remember, too,” Chase said, her voice nearly as full of yearning as Rose’s had been. “Just a kiss on the head and the sound of her voice. She had a beautiful voice, just like yours.”

“Sing for us, Rose,” Adara requested. “Sing the song I taught you—the one that was her lullaby.”

Rose smiled her acceptance. There were not many things she could do well, but singing was one of them. She settled onto the warm ground and crossed her legs underneath her skirt as her sisters did the same, then took a deep breath and began:

*“The clouds may rain and the wind may blow  
But there is one thing I will always know  
The best place I could ever be  
Is the one where you are here with me . . .”*

Two birds alighted near the girls, and then a third.

“Keep singing, Rose,” Chase whispered, her eyes wide. Rose nodded, silently willing the creatures to keep their distance.

*“. . . The sea may come and the sea may go  
And times grow hard through years of woe  
But all this I will face gladly  
As long as you are here with me.”*

Rose’s voice, sweet as birdsong, drew down blue jays and robins, sparrows and wrens. They perched upon the garden fence and the dirt between the rows of plants, listening intently as though they could comprehend her words.

When Rose’s song came to an end, a single sparrow hopped toward the girl, chirping inquisitively. She swallowed hard. While she was singing, she had managed to ignore her audience, but now she fought to hold her ground as the bird hopped closer and its chirps grew more urgent.

“I am sorry, I do not understand,” she said with a puzzled glance at her sisters.

The sparrow gave one deep cheep of indignation and took off, followed within seconds by all the others who had been listening.

“I think he thought you were a bird!” Chase giggled. “He was probably trying to court you.”

“I should have told him I already have a beau,” Rose grinned.

“You could have ten beaus if you wanted,” Chase returned. “You are pretty enough.”

“I only want my one,” Rose replied firmly.

“And a good thing too, or else I would be too busy fighting the others off to spend time with you,” a male voice called, and Rose turned her head to see her sweetheart leaning against the garden fence.

“Darren!”

She scrambled to her feet, brushing the dirt off her skirt and hastening over to the young man. He leapt lightly over the rail and seized her in an enthusiastic embrace, picking her up by the waist and spinning her around before setting her back down once again.

“Darren, you saw me only yesterday!” she protested, laughing at his enthusiasm.

“Mmm, and it was too long ago by far. What do you think? Can your sisters spare you today?”

“Go on, Rose,” Adara called. “We are almost done anyway. Just be back in time for supper.”

“I guarantee it,” Darren said, sweeping the girls a courtly bow and making them giggle. “If you ladies will pardon us.”

Taking Rose by the hand, he led her out of the garden and across the fields that stretched behind her house. The fields seemed to stretch on forever, but Rose knew they were only a fraction of what Aunt Tess had once owned. Rose’s uncle had died in an accident before she was even born, and Aunt Tess had been forced to sell most of his land and to lease the rest to neighboring farms. Still, she had chosen to remain on her husband’s farm rather than return to her family in Nathar, which turned out to be a fortunate choice for Rose’s father. Shortly after Rose was born, disaster had struck his merchant business, causing him to lose all that he owned. When this happened, Aunt Tess had been more than willing to take him and his family in.

Though Rose could remember nothing of life in Nathar, she knew her family had once been wealthy and that now they were not. Renting out their remaining fields allowed them to scrape by, with Aunt Tess retaining only enough workable land for their family to put food on their table. It was a

simple enough life and they did not have much, but they did not lack for what was important.

“Where are you taking me, Darren?” Rose probed, even though she could easily guess. There was only one destination of worth in this direction.

He did not answer, just chucked her under the chin with his free hand and led her through billows of burgeoning wheat and stalks of corn until they emerged at the banks of a small pond.

With a sigh of contentment, Rose slipped off her shoes and stepped ankle-deep into the water, relishing the feel of the dark mud squishing between her toes. She turned around to see Darren staring at her, his warm brown eyes showing such an intensity of feeling that it made her shiver in delicious response.

“Come and sit with me,” he said, guiding her under a willow tree. He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it deftly, not minding that her fingers were still lightly stained with dirt.

“As soon as I have saved enough money, I am going to marry you, and we will have lots of children, and you will never need to work another day in your life,” he promised her.

Rose looked at him slyly. “I think you are missing an important step there, or do you not think you should ask me first?”

“Why, do you have someone else in mind?”

“Well, there *were* a lot of handsome boys on the road today,” Rose teased.

Darren’s brow creased with mock concern. “Then I better make sure I am still the one you want.” Pulling her close, he kissed her ardently. When at last they broke away, they were both breathless. “I take that as a yes.”

“Impertinent youth!” Rose laughed, her blue eyes bright. Darren reached out and pushed her hair behind her ear, stroking the scar along one of her cheeks with his thumb as he did so.

“I love your hair,” he murmured. “It is like sunshine, but even more radiant. It suits you well, my beauty.”

Rose blushed. She always felt self-conscious when he complimented her. “Anyway,” she said, “I *like* to work. Besides, I know your family. You cannot tell *me* that managing a house full of children is not as demanding as any man’s job.”

He chuckled. “You are probably right.”

Darren settled back against the bole of the willow tree and pulled Rose to him so that her back was resting against his chest. Rose listened to the sound of the willow's branches swaying in the breeze, loving the strong feel of Darren's arms wrapped around her and the muscled hardness of his chest. Her sweetheart whispered in her ear about the house he would one day build for her. She tried to shush him, but could not stop him sharing his dreams with her, nor herself from dreaming along with him.

"Play me a song," she said after a while.

Darren obligingly rose and removed a comb and piece of waxed parchment from inside the pouch on his belt. Rose looked up at him from where she sat as he folded the parchment over the comb, propped one foot upon a root, and began to play his makeshift harmonica. It was a tune often performed at weddings and festivals—simple, yet lively. Rose sang along softly, basking in her sweetheart's music and the golden the afternoon; even the birds that fluttered down to listen could not diminish her contentment.



## CHAPTER TWO



TESS WATCHED through the window as Rose strolled out of the vegetable garden with her beau.

“At least one of them has prospects,” she commented to her brother. “I worry about Adara. I was married for two years already by her age, and yet she continues to show no real interest in any of the village’s men! They certainly do not lack interest toward her.”

“Adara will find a beau when she is ready. You had no interest either until you met Graham. Then you had plenty—enough to move to a different country to be with him,” Mercer remarked. He kept his eyes fixed on the hoe he was mending. The shaft had recently split and the new one he was carving was still a little too wide to fit on the metal head.

“And then there is Chase,” Tess continued, unheeding. “That girl has more suitors than she knows what to do with, and she toys with their hearts something dreadful. She should commit to one and let the others go.”

“She just likes the attention. It is the boys who are foolish to pursue her when she clearly has no interest in anything but flirting,” Mercer said calmly.

“Harrumph! You would defend her caprices to the ends of the world.”

“That I would,” Mercer replied. “As for Adara, why should her lack of suitors concern you? *You* manage life very well without a husband. You were young when Graham died and could easily have married again had you so chosen. In fact, you could *still* marry again—I personally know of several men in the village who are more than interested in your hand.”

“My hand or my land?” Tess asked with a wry smile. “Anyway, I am far too busy caring for you and the girls to want to add in a husband.”

“Suit yourself.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I told you I would bring her back before supper,” Darren announced as he opened cottage door for Rose.

“So you did,” Tess acknowledged. “Rose, dear, please bring in some wood for the fire. Darren, would you care to join our meal?”

“I would at that, thank you.”

“It seems you eat with us more often than you do with your own family,” Mercer commented as he cleared his things from the table.

“Does that bother you, sir?”

“Not in the least. It is good to have another man’s company in the house.”

“I am pleased to hear that. If you will excuse me, though, I am going to go help Rose.”

But Rose did not need his help. She greeted him with a smile as he approached, seemingly untroubled by the large bundle of wood she carried on her back.

“Really, Rose, how much does your family need?” he asked, amazed by the quantity she had chosen to bring.

“It is not yet summer, and I know Father gets cold at night,” Rose replied, not the least out of breath.

“Here, let me carry that. I am a woodcutter after all, and I am used to it.”

“I can manage,” Rose demurred. “I have a strong back. It seems I was meant to be a farmer’s daughter.”

“You were meant to be a princess,” Darren said, taking the bundle anyway. It was even heavier than he had thought, and he staggered for a moment until he rebalanced.

“Well, it is a good thing I am not, then, or I would never have met you.”

“In that case, a *very* good thing!” he agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The family took their seats around the large oak table with Mercer and Tess on the ends, Adara and Chase on one side, and Rose and Darren on the other. The food on the table steamed deliciously in the cool evening air, but no one reached to serve it.

Instead, Mercer picked up Rose’s right hand and Adara’s left in his own, and the others all followed suit. Not every family prayed before a meal, but his did so without fail.

“Thank you, Lord, for another day. Thank you for family and friends who make it worthwhile, for food that sustains us, and a home that keeps us well. May our lives be worthy of these blessings. Amen.”

Mercer ended the prayer, but did not break the circle of hands. Instead, everyone sat in silence, each mentally adding their own devotions. Mercer waited a few moments after he had finished his, then lightly squeezed Adara’s hand. Only after the squeeze had passed around the circle and returned to him once more—signifying that everyone was done—did he release their hands.

“Well, daughters, the garden looks lovely,” he said as he served himself some stew. “Not a weed to be seen. We should have a good harvest this year.”

“I think so,” Adara affirmed. “My friend Meg gave me some peas her father imported from Gurion. I hope to get them to grow.”

“I have no doubt that you will,” Mercer replied loyally. “You seem to have a gift for making things flourish.”

He blew lightly on his bowl of stew and took a sip, taking care not to get any on his beard. Chase noticed his precaution.

“Are you going to shave that off this summer, Father?” she asked.  
“Surely you get hot under there.”

Mercer’s eyes twinkled at the old debate. “In a house full of women, I must do something to maintain my male pride.”

“You have more than enough pride, male or otherwise,” Tess snorted.

“What would you think if I grew a beard?” Darren asked Rose.

“I would think that I needed another beau,” she teased.

“Imagine trying to kiss someone through a beard,” Chase grimaced.  
“Disgusting! No offense, Father.”

“None taken.”

“Really, Chase, can you speak of nothing else? Such conversation is hardly appropriate, let alone at the dinner table!” Tess scolded.

“Sorry, Aunt,” Chase replied, not the least abashed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I had a lovely afternoon,” Darren said, bidding Rose farewell. “See you tomorrow?”

“If I must,” she smiled.

Adara watched her sister wave goodbye to her sweetheart, a wishful ache rising up inside her. “I will take the scraps to the goat,” she volunteered abruptly, seizing the trencher from the table before Aunt Tess could ask.

Once outside, Adara hastened to the goat’s pen as quick as she could. She tossed the scraps into the enclosure, her eyes searching the surrounding area as best she could in the dimming light. Even so, he still surprised her.

“Late tonight,” he murmured against her hair as he hugged her from behind.

“Jon,” she breathed, turning to face him and tilting her head up for a kiss. He willingly obliged her, and once again she fell in love with everything about him—his height, his smile, the way he smelled of dirt and sun from days spent in the fields. Hopeless. She was hopeless.

“Marry me,” he said, and Adara felt the moment shatter. She started to pull away, but he held her close, taking her chin in his hand and making her look at him. “Why do you refuse me? When others are near, you do not even acknowledge me. I do not understand.”

“Yes, you do,” she countered. “I have told you why before.”

“Then tell me again, and maybe this time it will make sense.”

It hurt too much to meet his gaze, so she took his hand in her own and looked at that instead. “I am poor, and your family is even poorer. You have no land on which to build a house for us—your father has to rent some of our farmland just to get by. And I have no dowry—nothing we can use to help start a life together. How can I tell my family about us? My aunt would just chide me for loving someone I cannot have, and my father would feel ashamed for not being able to provide a dowry for me. Knowing about us would only cause them pain.”

“I see.”

She knew Jon *did* see, though he was not as pragmatic about it as Adara forced herself to be. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she could not stop them from spilling down her cheeks.

“Hey now,” he said, brushing them away with his thumb. “Even if it takes me a lifetime to save up the money, I *will* buy us some land, and I *will* build us a house, and I *will* marry you one day, Adara.”

“Is that a promise?” she asked, her voice quavering.

“It is indeed,” he replied, sealing his oath with a kiss.

“Adara! Where are you?” Chase called from the house. “Did the goat kick you in the head or something?”

“Be right there!” Adara called back. She pulled Jon close and lost herself in another kiss. “I have to go,” she said at last, breathless.

“Until tomorrow, then?” he asked, not letting go of her hand.

She nodded. “I promise.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rose lay in bed, listening to the sounds of the crickets in the fields. The household had long ago stilled into slumber, but she lay awake, etching every bit of her afternoon with Darren into her memory. Maybe it would give her good dreams tonight. She could hope for that.

Pesk lay curled up on her feet, a warm weight against the cool spring night. Even now, his presence there still surprised her. He had appeared on the farm years before and had immediately attached himself to Rose. With her fear of animals, he had scared her to pieces, but he had refused to leave her alone. Rose had begged her father to get rid of him, but he had abstained—she suspected on the advice of Aunt Tess, who seemed to think

having a dog around would help lessen Rose's fears. So Rose had been left to deal with the dog on her own.

Desperately, she had tried chasing the hound away, shouting at him, throwing sticks at him, and then finally ignoring him. No matter what she did, the dog had continued to follow her everywhere. If she shut a door in his face, he would just wait patiently outside the room for her to emerge. It was only when she woke up one morning to find her arms wrapped tight around the dog (he had crept in through her open window while she slept, snuggling close so carefully that she had not woken) that she finally surrendered to his presence.

Now, comfortably wrapped in her blankets and warmed by the weight of the old dog, Rose let her mind drift back to Adara's description of their mother and her lullaby.

"The clouds may rain and the wind may blow, but there is one thing I will always know: the best place I could ever be, is the one where you are here with me," she sang softly, trying to imagine the verse in her mother's voice. Pesk rumbled in his sleep, and Rose sighed, giving up. How could she envision something she had never heard?

"Goodnight, Pesk," she whispered. Rolling slowly onto her side so as not to disturb the dog, Rose closed her eyes and Dreamed.

## CHAPTER THREE



ROSE AWOKED the next morning feeling utterly exhausted. She managed to drag herself listless out of bed, only to trip on the blankets she had torn off during the night, nearly falling flat on her face. Pesk gave her a baleful look from where he lay curled up on her bedding.

“Did I kick you off again?” she asked apologetically. “You might not want to sleep with me anymore.”

He woofed and lay his head back down, shutting his eyes again.

Shaking her head at the dog, Rose staggered over to the small mirror that hung near her clothes chest. Her eyes had dark circles under them, but it was the two scars running down each of her cheeks that drew her attention. She touched them lightly with her fingertips, remembering the pain she had felt in her Dream.

She had been in the grip of a terrible creature, one so loathsome it had made her quake with fear, though she could not remember what it looked like now that she was awake. Then there had come a searing pain down the sides of her face, followed by the stomach-wrenching sensation of falling—

falling forever knowing that at any moment she was going to hit the ground and die.

Now, Rose traced the ridge of her scars—not quite symmetrical—from where their reflection started near her ears, down to where they thinned as they approached the corners of her mouth. Yesterday, Chase had called her pretty, but Rose could not agree—not when she had these. Darren once told her that her scars only served to highlight her beauty, but now as Rose pondered them, her nightmare fresh in her mind, they seemed just as horrible to her as her Dream. What was the connection? There had to be one. She could not dream the same Dream for years and have it mean nothing.

At least it was not that frequent anymore. When Rose was younger, the Dream had awoken her—screaming—every few days. Now, it occurred only a few times a month, and Rose had learned that by working hard all day so she was exhausted by evening and focusing on only good things right before going to sleep, she could usually avoid it altogether. But not always.

With a final glance in the mirror, Rose began to get dressed. No sense in letting a bad night spoil her day as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Gads, Rose, you look awful!” Chase quipped as her sister entered the room. “You sure disprove the notion of beauty sleep.”

“Leave off, Chase,” Rose muttered, not in the mood. She poured herself a cup of water from the pitcher on the table and began to slice herself some bread—she had missed breakfast.

“That bad, hmm?” Adara queried from where she sat mending a shirt. “Do you want to tell us about it?”

“It was the same dream. Nothing new to tell.”

“You would think it would stop bothering you after all these years,” Chase remarked.

“You try dreaming it, then.”

“Girls, really, I—” Aunt Tess broke off as someone knocked sharply at the door. She frowned. “That had better not be Thomas Crofter come to complain about his rent again. Every week for nigh on twenty years he has



come by—you would think the man would know by now that the price of leasing my fields is not going to change.”

Setting aside the dough she had been kneading, Aunt Tess dusted the flour from her hands onto her skirt and answered the door.

“Yes?” she demanded crossly. “Oh, beg your pardon, sir. I thought you were someone else.”

“Message, ma’am,” the courier replied stiffly, handing her a folded letter.

“Thank you. Would you care for a refreshment?” Aunt Tess offered in apology as she took the letter.

“No, ma’am. I must be off.” Turning sharply on his heel, the man strode back toward the road, and Rose glimpsed a horse waiting patiently for him by the fence before her aunt closed the door.

“Odd,” Aunt Tess murmured, peering closely at the seal on the letter. Picking up the bread knife from the table, she used the hilt to break the wax, then quickly scanned the letter’s contents.

“Chase, go fetch your father from the field,” Aunt Tess commanded, excitement making her voice rise. “He must read this at once.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“The most joyous news!” Adara cried that evening, throwing her arms around Jon and nearly causing him to tumble over the goat’s low fence.

“Father’s ship has been found!”

“His ship? What are you talking about?” Jon queried, completely bemused.

“The *Delphin*! Father used to be a merchant in Nathar, but three of his ships went missing at sea, and he lost everything. Only now, the *Delphin* has been found! She was sighted at one of the southern ports and the dock master sent word to Father that the ship was heading back to Sea Harbor—our old home. She could arrive any day! Father is leaving tomorrow to meet her.”

“That is . . . wonderful news. Will you be moving back to Nathar, then?” Jon asked, looking away.

“What? No, of course not,” Adara protested, turning his head to face hers. “Our life is here now. But with the money from the cargo . . . Oh, Jon, ask me again!”

“Ask you what?”

“Ask me to marry you.”

He went still. “You mean it?” he breathed.

“Ask me!”

He took her hands in his, holding them to his chest. “Adara—the fairest, the smartest, the most worthy girl in all of Darvell—will you be my wife?”

She kissed him hard in answer.

“I take it that means yes?” Jon asked when they finally broke away, eyes shining.

“Always and forever, yes,” Adara replied, caressing his sun-bleached hair.

“Then I will speak to your father at once,” he said, taking her hand and beginning to walk toward the house.

“No, not tonight,” Adara objected, pulling him back. “Even now, I can scarcely believe our good fortune is real—I know Father is nearly as overwhelmed. I do not want him concerned with anything else at the moment. Ask him when he returns.”

“You are too good,” Jon said, wrapping his hands through her chestnut locks and tugging her close. “But for you I would wait forever—my wife.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mercer checked the bundles tied to the mare’s back, making sure they were well-secured for the long trip ahead. Some food and drink, a few coins, and a change of clothes were all that he carried. He hoped to return bearing much, much more.

“What gifts shall I bring you?” he asked his daughters, who stood watching nearby.

“We need nothing, Father, except your safe return,” Adara demurred.

“Well, *I* need something. You can bring me a new set of knives. The old ones are worn down to a sliver,” Tess called from the doorway.

“You will have the best knives in the land once I return with the money from my cargo!” he called back. “But come, girls. There are some things that can only be bought in the city, and Nathar’s goods are the finest in the world. What would you have?”

Adara hesitated before admitting, “A dress, Father. A pretty one—red, with a lace collar.” As she spoke, her expression grew wistful, and her eyes

glowed as though she were imagining some delightful scene.

Chase snickered. "A red dress for a farm girl? Such expensive taste! What need have *you* of a bride's finery? There is no one to give you use for it."

"Well, what would you have?" Adara demanded crossly, her cheeks aflame.

"Gold ribbons for my hair," Chase replied instantly, fingering the bit of leather that currently held back her auburn stands.

"And you think my request foolish!"

"What about you, Rose?" Mercer asked, forestalling an argument and turning his gaze on his youngest daughter. "A dress? Ribbons? What is your fancy?"

She looked thoughtful. "Well, you named me Rose, but I have never seen one—they do not grow here in Darvell. I have always wondered what they look like. I would very much like you to bring me one when you return."

"My sweet, you shall have a whole bushel of roses!" he grinned.

"One is enough," she smiled.

"I think Rose is the most foolish of us all," Chase quipped, only half teasing. "After all, a dress can be passed down and ribbons can be reused, but a rose lasts only a few days at best."

"Even fleeting beauty is worthwhile in the eyes of its beholder," Rose retorted.

"And this beholder is awestruck," Mercer said, pulling his girls into an embrace. "You are my roses, my ribbons, my finery. I shall miss you so while I am away."

"We shall miss you, too, Father," Adara said, her face buried against his shoulder.

"Ride carefully," Chase instructed.

"Stay well," Rose enjoined.

"That I will, if only to see you all the sooner." He reluctantly let them go and mounted his horse. "Until then!"

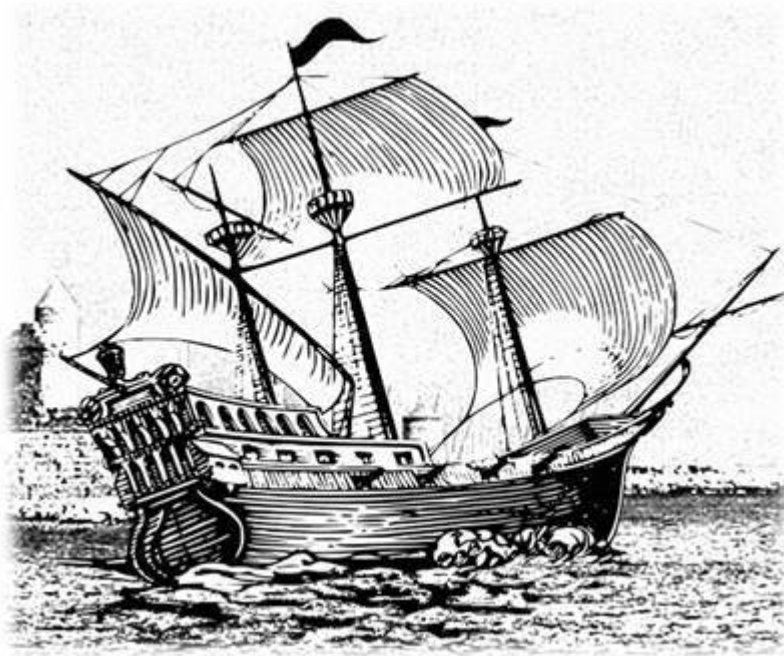
"Wait!" Tess suddenly called. She hurried up to Mercer and stood on her tiptoes to give him a peck on the cheek, her eyes shining. "Take care, brother."

"And you, take care of my family," he said softly, gripping her hands. "I will return before you know it."

Picking up the reins, Mercer kicked the horse into a slow trot, waving a last farewell. To his surprise, Pesk leapt over the fence and padded alongside him until they had reached the end of Tess's property, at which point he left Mercer to proceed alone.

"On to fortune and glory," the man told his horse, patting its neck, "and a safe journey to us both—I hope."

## CHAPTER FOUR



MERCER RODE INTO TOWN like a conquering king, bursting with excitement and victory at his ship's return. How had it happened? Where had it been? He would soon know the answers to all of his questions!

He headed straight for the docks, his eyes scanning the rows of ships for his own. There it was, the *Delphin*! But it looked different—smaller, stouter, with less topsail and no jib. He shook his head. It had been sixteen years since he had last seen his vessel. Perhaps he misremembered it.

"Ship owner Mercer requesting permission to come aboard!" he called.

The sailor on duty sauntered over to the railing and peered down at him. "Aye, the Dock Master told us he sent for ye," he shouted back. "The Captain wants a word. He and the others be at the Mermaid's Rest."

"Thank you," Mercer replied. He was aching to ask the sailor his questions, but it was the captain's right to relay the story first. Mercer found the inn quickly, his memory of the harbor as keen as if he had never moved

away. The carousing refrain of spirited sailors met his ears well before he reached the door.

Mercer stepped inside, his gaze sweeping the room for a familiar face. Being early afternoon, the place was only half full, but there were still far too many seamen sitting at the trestle tables to hail only from his ship.

The innkeeper hurried over. "How can I help you?" he asked, his sharp grey eyes taking in Mercer's foreign clothes and travel-worn appearance. His grin broadened. "Just tell me your desire, traveler—food, drink, a warm bed? My inn has the best accommodations in Sea Harbor."

Mercer shook his head. "Right now, I am looking for Captain Marino," he replied, raising his voice to be heard above the din.

"Mr. Mercer!" a burly man cried, separating himself from the pack.

"Do I know you?" Mercer asked as he shook the man's outstretched hand. The innkeeper withdrew help his other guests.

"First mate Wilson, sir. Capt'n Wilson, now."

Mercer searched the man's face. He dimly recalled a smooth-faced youth with that name and could just see a glimpse of that lad beneath the weathering of sixteen years. "*Captain* Wilson? Where is Captain Marino?"

"Dead, sir."

"Dead? I am sorry to hear that—he was a good man. Well, Captain Wilson, you must have quite a tale to tell."

"That I do. Let us go where ye can hear it."

But instead of departing the room, the sailor went back to his table, returning a moment later with a half-filled jug and two empty tankards. "A tale like this be thirsty work, both for the teller and the listener. Ale will help it flow."

The two men retreated to a second chamber near the back of the inn. This one was smaller, with only a few chairs, no fire, and no occupants. Captain Wilson settled easily into a hard-backed armchair and poured liberal helpings of ale for Mercer and himself.

"So what happened?" Mercer asked, picking up his tankard and taking a drink. "The last I saw of the *Delphin* was the day she left port for Takia."

"Aye," Wilson said darkly. "We got to Takia well enough, sir, and traded for the gold ye wanted. Ye should have seen it—such a beautiful metal! They asked a fair price for it, too, which should have warned us of trouble—fair price from a Takian? Never! Sure enough, pirates beset us on our return—Takian ships, ye mark me word, though they flew no flag. No doubt

the brigands had struck a deal with the merchants to steal back the gold they sold. Well, we outran that lot of flea-bitten dogs, but the chase took us far out to sea and right into a storm. 'Twas a tempest sure and true, and it left us battered and broken, half sunk in the water. We had to throw our cargo overboard just to stay afloat. 'Tis all gone, sir."

Mercer's mouth had gone dry. Wilson was right—listening to this tale was thirsty work. He took another gulp of ale—larger this time.

"What then?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Well sir, we drifted south for a time before finally grounding on a small isle. 'Twas full of odd trees bearing fruits the likes of which we had ne'er before seen. It had no animals, though—nay, not even birds.

"As for our ship, 'twas beyond repair, sinking fast despite our best efforts. We tore it apart to make shelters for ourselves, but even so, Captain Marino and two others died of heat fever before we had a chance to adjust to the southern sun."

Captain Wilson took a swig from his tankard before continuing, his eyes distant with memory.

"We lived on that island for nigh on six years, till a passing ship caught sight of our fire and sent a scout. You cannot imagine our joy, knowing we had been rescued at last! Yet the crew who rescued us was very strange, with odd coloration and habits. They did not speak our tongue, but we managed to convey our need for passage. They took us to a land beyond the end of the known world, and what a land it was! By the time we reached its shore, I had learned enough of their tongue to beg for a ship to take us home. As we had no money or goods to trade, however, the shipyard master refused my request.

"He was a good soul, though, and shrewd in his way. He agreed that if me crew worked for him for ten years, he would grant us a vessel in return. It was a good bargain, and we agreed, serving our time with willing hearts. When ten years had passed, he stood by his promise, though he was loath to see us go and offered us commissions of our own if we stayed. Some of the crew took him up on it—many had married during that time and had no desire to leave. But the rest of us were tied to Nathar, and I knew 'twas my duty as captain to bring home the news of our fate.

His expression as he looked at Mercer was full of pity. "We named our new ship the *Delphin* for old time's sake, but she is not the same ship that you sent out. That one is lost forever—I am sorry."

Mercer nodded, unable to speak. Wilson's watched him for a moment before continuing, his tone simultaneously sympathetic and stern.

"I have heard about your misfortunes, Mr. Mercer. You were always kind to us, and fair. But my men and I have suffered, too, and we have worked hard to earn our ship. We will not soon give her up."

"That is as it should be," Mercer said, swallowing the lump in his throat. "I am just glad to hear that you and the crew are alive and well."

Captain Wilson stood and extended his hand. "You are a good man, Mr. Mercer. If you ever enter the trade again, I will be more than happy to carry your cargo."

"I shall remember that," Mercer replied, knowing there was no possibility now that he ever could.

There seemed no point in lingering in town after that, and Mercer set out again the very same day, pausing only at the old graveyard near the sea. There on a low hill beneath a blanket of marine grasses and wildflowers, his wife and infant daughter lay in eternal sleep. Mercer stood with head bowed, remembering anew the aching agony of that day, and how the only light had been the baby—its presence inexplicable, impossible—that he had found amidst the shroud of roses laid by mourners upon the grave.

This time, there was no joyous bundle waiting for him to find, no brightness to dispel his gloom.

*At least, I am no worse off than I was before, he thought wryly. And only a little poorer for having stayed at a few hostels along the way.*

It was small comfort.

He had no coins left now, nor food either, and there were no hostels on this stretch of road to obtain fare from if he had. Hunger clawed at his belly, but he scarcely noticed—instead, Mercer's mind replayed the scene in Sea Harbor over and over again, as though doing so would change its outcome. He groaned, remembering the hope that had filled him only a few weeks before. How foolish his expectation now seemed to be!

At least he was almost home. He had entered the Great Forest early that morning, and Mercer hoped to reach the other side—and his village!—before night fell completely. But he had no way of knowing how close he was. All he knew he was that he was somewhere in Gurion. There were no maps that charted the forest, and the pathways that led through the woods were seldom traveled and thin, at times almost disappearing altogether.



Like this one did right now. Mercer scanned for a break in the brush, but he saw nothing that resembled a trail. He pulled back on the reins and his mare stopped, whickering softly. Mercer looked behind him. No path there either, just a few broken twigs that marked the horse's passage.

Mercer chewed his lip. He had a choice: he could turn back the way he had come and try to find another path, or press on and hope to rejoin the trail up ahead. Turning back would mean spending the night in the forest, and no one in their right mind did that if they could help it—just because no one had seen a griffin or a sphinx since his grandfather's day did not mean they were not there. Men still went missing in the woods too often to be coincidence.

On, then. The trail had vanished before and his horse had always found it again. He would just have to trust the mare's instincts to lead the way.

"Go, girl," he said, patting her neck. "Take us home."

One ear flicked back, then forward again, and the horse resumed her ambling gait. Afternoon faded into twilight, and twilight into darkness, and still the mare walked on. Mercer knew by now he had made a mistake—either he had been further from the Darvell border than he had thought, or else they were going completely off course. Yet what choice did he have but to press on?

Every sound now made him flinch. Was that cracking in the distance a deer stepping on a twig. . . or a bear snapping its jaws? The shrill hum of insects set Mercer's teeth on edge, but a pause in their incessant noise filled him with alarm—did the silence signal a predator on the approach? His horse sensed his nerves and grew more and more restless, tossing her head often and snorting loudly.

Mercer strained to see through the shadows, but the darkness was complete. They had to stop. They could not stop. His horse might step in a hole and lame her leg. Worse might befall them if they paused. Frightened and exhausted, Mercer prayed for deliverance. Just when he had decided they dared travel no further, the trees began to thin and they emerged into a clearing.

No—not a clearing. An estate. "Thank you, God," Mercer breathed, urging his horse toward the safety of human shelter. A pond shimmered in the starlight, and a manicured garden lay silhouetted to one side. A grand lodge rose up just beyond that—a black contour against the night.

*A lord's hunting lodge, no doubt, Mercer thought, guiding his horse around the side of the building toward the front. Only a lord would be mad enough to build in the Great Forest.*

No light gleamed from any of the windows he passed, and Mercer began to fear that the place was abandoned. Still, the night was not terribly cold, and even being in the presence of a dwelling gave him comfort. Within its shadow, he might well find sleep. Better yet, a lodge like this would surely have a stable for horses, and such places were not usually locked. He could stay there.

As he rounded the front of the lodge, however, Mercer espied the faint glow of a fire gleaming through a downstairs window. Immediately, his heart lightened. It seemed there was someone here after all! Perhaps a caretaker to maintain the place in the off season. Yes, lords always had people to do things like that. Why had he not thought of that before?

Mercer eagerly dismounted from his horse and tied its reins around a post near the door. With deep relief, he climbed the stone steps and rapped sharply on the ornately carved door. "Good evening!" he called loudly when there was no answer. "Is anyone there?"

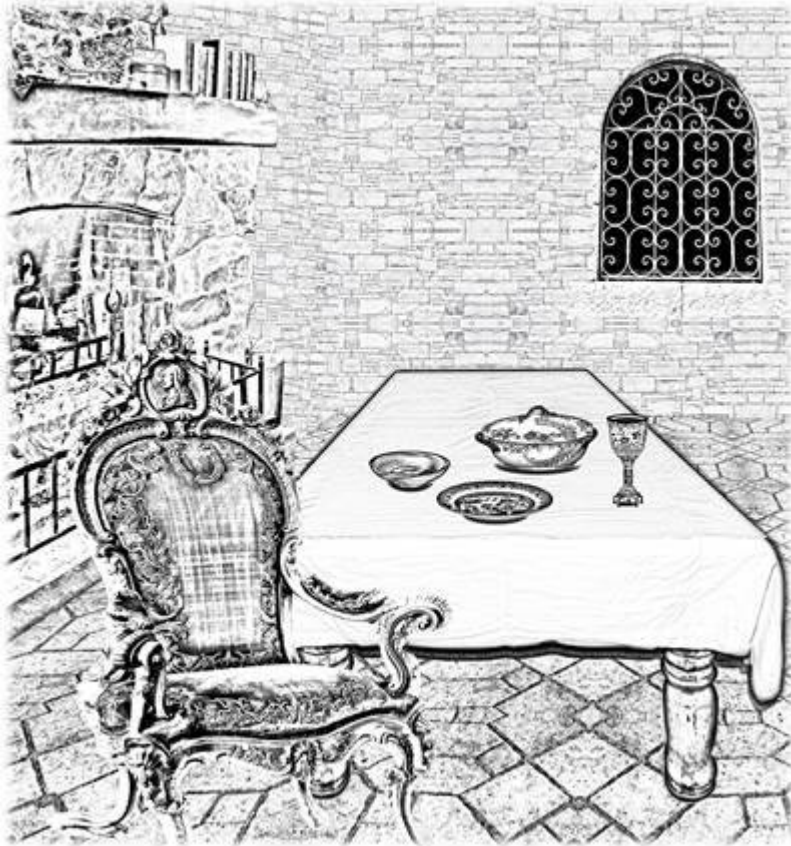
He waited another minute, then climbed back down the stairs and walked over to the gleaming window. Peering in, he saw that the light was coming from a fireplace against the far wall. Blankets were mounded on the floor in front of the hearth, but the room was bare of much else.

A dull squeaking sound drew his attention back to the door, and he saw it swing open in admittance.

"Thank you," he exclaimed, hastening over to the steps. "I had feared I would have to spend the night in these woods, and I—" Mercer broke off, staring into the corridor.

No one was there.

## CHAPTER FIVE



ARI BOUNDED UPSTAIRS just in time, trying to quiet his breathless pants. A visitor! He had not seen another soul for nearly four years—not since the last time Liliath had dropped by.

Barely able to contain his excitement, he had ordered the front door thrown open, then commanded the room where he slept to change into a magnificent hall for his guest. There had scarcely been enough time left for him to hide himself upstairs before the stranger had appeared in the doorway. The last thing Ari wanted to do was scare the man away, so he slunk back into the shadows, allowing his black fur to blend in completely with the darkness.

The stranger stepped into the entrance corridor, and Ari drank in the sight of his face. It was bearded, deeply tanned, and framed by dark brown hair; Ari thought it looked kind, but who was he to judge human expressions anymore?

“I say, is anyone there?” the man repeated, looking around. Ari saw him peer into the room he had just transformed, then draw back. “What is this? I could have sworn—” The man turned to step back outside, and Ari almost leapt after him—afraid he would leave, unable to bear his only company departing so soon—but managed to restrain himself. After a moment, the man returned, shaking his head.

“I could have sworn the room I saw was bare save for some blankets—yet now in its place I find a spectacular hall. I must be more tired than I thought. Where is the caretaker?”

He glanced up, and Ari held himself very still, scarcely daring to breathe. Hearing human speech again—real speech, not a replica from the mirror room—was a joy so exquisite, it was almost painful.

“I am going to go stable my horse,” the man announced to the seemingly empty house. “If anyone takes issue with that, please tell me now.” He waited a few seconds. “Very well,” he muttered, shaking his head again. “If my daughters could see me, they would think me mad, talking to myself. Yet someone *must* be here, for who else could have laid the fire? Unless I am going mad in truth.”

He left, and Ari let out the breath he had been holding. He considered what to do. He could not stay where he was—the man would need to come upstairs to sleep, and Ari did not want to risk hiding in a room only to be discovered by his visitor if the man decided to explore.

Tentatively, Ari crept back downstairs and into the hall—the only chamber whose design he could control. He listened hard, but the distant sounds he heard told him the man was leading his horse to the stable. Furrowing his heavy brow in concentration, Ari caused a spiral staircase to temporarily descend from the ceiling to the floor, permitting him access to the rafters that spanned the hall and the entrance corridor. Hidden behind the ceiling slats, he would be able to watch his guest eat without making his presence known.

“Feed him, bathe him, make him comfortable,” Ari commanded the house as he ascended into the roof, his heart skipping a little with

anticipation. “Let him want for nothing. Make him happy. Make him want to stay.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mercer was pleased to find the stable unlocked and a stall already furnished with sweet-smelling hay. He could see additional bales stored up in the loft, but puzzled over who had prepared the stall, for in addition to fresh grasses, there was a trough full of clear water, a curry comb, and a horse blanket hanging over one side.

Perhaps the caretaker had gone for a ride and left the stall ready for his horse’s return.

*A ride—in the forest—at night?*

Mercer ignored the skeptical voice in his head, just as he ignored the lack of evidence that there had ever been a previous occupant to the stall.

“Perhaps he heard me say that I wished to stable you and prepared this place for us. We did take a few minutes riding around the lodge again. There were no lights in the other windows, so the caretaker must have been near the front. But why then did he not speak when I called out?” Mercer mused aloud to the mare. “’Tis a riddle, that is for certain.”

Once he was confident his horse was comfortable, Mercer returned to the lodge. The entrance corridor—formerly dark—was now blazing with light cast off by brackets of rushlights along the walls. Mercer saw that the corridor ended in a large stone staircase, which led up to the second floor. The doors preceding the staircase were all closed except for the one on the right, which he knew belonged to the room he had looked in first—the one he had thought was a plain, little chamber when he had peered through the window, but which had somehow transfigured itself into a marvelous hall.

He looked inside and drew back, startled—the room had changed yet again! True, a long table still ran through the middle of the chamber, but now it was laden with dishes full of delectable food. Along one wall, a fire still roared, but now hundreds of rushlights also shone brightly from every wall.

“Impossible!” the man exclaimed. “How could one caretaker prepare my horse’s stall, set the table, and still light all those wicks in the time it took me to stable my mare? Even ten men could not have done it. I tell you, this is impossible!”

But there was no denying the rich scent of savory stew and . . . was that roast duck he smelled? Mercer's mouth began to water and his stomach rumbled with remembered hunger. When was the last time he had eaten? He had not had coin to buy new food for several days now, and he had run out of bread and cheese sometime during that time.

"Is this for me?" he asked loudly, uncertain whom he was talking to, but knowing there must be someone nearby. "May I—shall I partake?"

There came no reply. Surely if the house was full of servants, they would make some sort of noise? And why would they refuse to show themselves?

"Very well, then," Mercer declared, hoping he was making the right choice. "I assume your silence implies consent. You have my gratitude."

He walked over to the table, which was covered in a white linen cloth so skillfully pressed that he could see no wrinkles. A mahogany chair stood alone at the table's head, pulled back just enough so that he could slip in. There was only one place set, and he reverently touched the fine ceramic plate, enthralled by its skillful border of painted gold. Even when he had been a merchant and had coffers full of coin, he had never owned a piece such as this!

Suddenly nervous that he was usurping a mighty lord's place, he started to stand and almost knocked over a washbowl and cloth that had appeared on a small table beside his chair. Mercer cast his gaze around frantically, but there was no one in sight. How could he have missed seeing and hearing the one who had put them there?

A feeling of deep unease washed through Mercer. Something was not right here. He was nearly tempted to take his horse and head back into the forest, but he reminded himself that he had seen no sign that he was in any sort of danger—something he could not guarantee if he ventured back into those dark woods!

*If my host left me a bowl to wash my hands in, then he—they?—must want me to eat,* Mercer reasoned. *Surely if they meant me harm, they would not have laid before me such extravagance.* He sat back down.

He was soon glad he did, for the fare was beyond delicious, and the wine he drank was fruity and rich. Mercer wished he could have eaten enough to do the meal justice, but when the piece of duck he had been holding slipped from his slumbering fingers and fell to the floor, he realized

he had drifted off. Pushing himself away from the table, Mercer placed the piece back onto the plate and wiped the grease off the floor with his sleeve.

Rising to his feet, he turned to the open door and asked, “Is there a place where I may rest?”

There was no answer—Mercer found he had not really expected one. He walked to the corridor and saw that most of the rushlights had gone out, except for a few near the top of the stairs. Feeling as though he were in a dream, Mercer climbed the steps.

The stairs stopped at a small platform near the rear of the house, with two corridors curving away on either side toward the front. They met again below a small window at the front of the house through which moonlight streamed, illuminating the ledge connecting the two corridors together and the floor down beneath.

The first room to Mercer’s left was open and light glowed gently from within. Mercer approached it cautiously and found inside a splendid bedroom. Blue drapes hung halfway down from the bedposts, and a thick blue coverlet lay folded back, as though beckoning him to slumber. A fire crackled in the hearth, its flame low and muted, as though it, too, were ready to sleep. Before it stood a large basin full of water, steam lightly curling up from its surface.

Mercer gaped at the hot bath, and had to stifle back a sudden sob. Such lordly luxury was too much, especially now that he was doomed to never be anything more than a poor farmer. Had his girls *ever* had a hot bath? No, never.

*My dear children, how I wish you were here in my place. This is the life you should have had—a life that now, in my confirmed misfortune, I will never be able to give you.*

Wracked with guilt, Mercer was nonetheless too sensible a man to ignore such a gift when offered. Pausing only to shut the door, he doffed his clothes and sunk deeply into the warm water. A sigh escaped him, and he leaned his head back against the padded edge and closed his eyes.

When he awoke, the water was cold and his neck was stiff. Mercer stood up and was only a little surprised to find a towel neatly folded on a small table, along with a fresh set of clothes. His old ones—discarded on the floor—were gone.

Mercer dried himself off and slipped into the fresh garments. They were the softest clothes he had ever worn, flowing cool and smooth against his

skin. Though they were a little shorter and a little stouter than he would have preferred, he hardly cared to complain.

Stumbling wearily over to the bed, Mercer climbed onto a mattress that was clearly made of the finest down—no hay-wrapped blankets here!—and into sheets that were even silkier than the clothes. He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, and did not stir even when the door creaked open and the basin, towel, and table quietly exited the room.



## CHAPTER SIX



MERCER AWOKE feeling more refreshed than he had in years. For several minutes, he simply lay still, relishing in the delicious comfort of his bed. At last, he forced himself to push aside the covers and get to his feet. His body moved quickly, with a limber invigoration he had not experienced since he was a young man.

The fire in the hearth had gone out, and the room was lit instead by a blaze of sunlight streaming in through a tall window. Mercer searched around for his boots but could not find them. Instead, he found a new pair waiting by the door. Like the clothes, these boots proved to be just a little

too small for him, but they were made of soft calfskin that would soon stretch to accommodate his feet.

Alert and nearly bursting with curiosity, Mercer stepped out into the passageway. A series of closed doors stretched off to the left, and he was sorely tempted to explore the rooms they hid, but he hesitated to invade his host's privacy.

*Will he show himself today?* Mercer wondered, heading down the stairs.

There was nobody in the entrance corridor, but the hall he had supped in stood open. Mercer saw with relief that the room looked the same as it had been the night before, though the dinner had been replaced by a fresh breakfast.

Once again, only one place was set.

Mercer sighed, but the aroma wafting from the food quickly dispelled his disappointment. A steaming loaf of bread and a plate of fresh fish sat ready and waiting, and a glass of wine had already been poured. Mercer took a large sip as he sat down—it was an even better vintage than the one he had been served the previous night.

“Thank you,” Mercer called to his hidden host, hoping the caretaker was near enough to hear. “Will you not join me at table?”

He received no response.

*Perhaps he is deaf,* Mercer considered as he ate. *That would explain why he does not answer. But why refuse to show himself? He has gone to such lengths to make me comfortable, and I have nothing to offer him in return—not even, it seems, my thanks.*

This puzzle perplexed Mercer, but it did not stop him from enjoying his food. At last, he leaned back in his chair and rubbed one hand over his distended belly. What a meal! Tess was a fine enough cook, but the fare he had just eaten—simple though it may have been—had been prepared so well that it would not have been out of place on the table of a king. Such a cook was wasted maintaining a forsaken forest lodge.

Reluctantly, Mercer rose to his feet. He wished he could linger for a few days and learn more about the place and its mysterious caretaker, but he had been away from home too long already. Besides, it would be rude to further impose on his host without a clear invitation to stay.

“I appreciate your hospitality,” he stated loudly, beginning to feel absurd. “Such generosity toward a stranger is truly noble. I am in your debt.”

Again, there was no reply. With a last look around the hall, Mercer left to go fetch his horse.

“Well, girl, this has been quite the queer adventure,” he told her. “My family will not believe me when I tell of it. Tess will likely think I fell off riding you and hit my head.”

The mare flicked back an ear and snorted as though offended by the very notion.

Mercer smiled and rubbed her nose. “I quite agree.”

He saddled the horse—all the tack had been oiled and cleaned in his absence—and placing one foot in the gleaming stirrup, he propelled himself onto the mare’s back.

“Time to go.”

The sun told him which way was home, and Mercer obediently guided his horse toward the rear of the lodge—he had indeed been traveling the wrong way last night. Now that it was day, he saw that the building was even grander than he had thought, and Mercer lamented the waste of such beauty and space. How his family would love to live in a place like this! Instead, only the invisible caretaker was able to enjoy its splendor, for its owner—if indeed, he deigned to visit it at all—would do so only to hunt and soon depart again.

As if to emphasize the estate’s misspent glory, a shimmering pond with a large willow tree on one bank came into view as Mercer rounded the corner. Next to the pond was the garden he had seen silhouetted in the dark. Now that it was light, he could see the sharp, spindly stems that belonged to only one species—roses. Turning lush with green leaves and growing buds, they were nonetheless still bare of blooms. If only he had passed this way a week or two later—then he would have been able to fulfill his youngest daughter’s desire at least! Mercer’s heart sank, and the despair he had forgotten during his remarkable stay returned full fold as he realized that he had failed to achieve even that simple request.

Wait, perhaps not! Mercer’s gaze fastened on a rosebush near the bank of the pond, and he eagerly dismounted his horse. Squatting low, he gingerly parted the stems of tight-closed buds to reveal a lone white rose nearly hidden by the leaves.

“Your beauty will make one of my daughters happy, at least,” he said softly, and deftly broke the rose’s stem.

Instantly a loud roar rent the air, making Mercer's muscles melt with fear and his horse scream in terror as it thundered toward the safety of the stable. Shaking so badly he nearly fell over, Mercer turned around just in time to see a great creature leap off the lodge's roof and race in his direction. He could not move; he was rooted to the spot. Within seconds, the terrible apparition had reached his side.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How dare you!" Ari snarled, trembling with such rage and anguish that he could scarcely speak. The man had collapsed to his knees in abject terror, but Ari did not care. "I have given you everything in my power—food!—lodging!—clean clothes! Yet you repay me by stealing the only thing here I truly treasure!"

The stranger's mouth spasmed as he made an effort to speak, and he had to gulp several times before he could manage any sound. "I—I am so sorry, my lord—my sir—honored Beast," he quaked. "I d—did not know—you have been so generous—I did not th—think you would m—mind my taking such a—such a small thing."

"I mind!" Ari roared.

"Forgive me, please," the man begged.

Ari glowered, some small part of his mind uncomfortably aware that he was overreacting. It was just one rose after all—others would grow in its place. But logic drowned beneath the torrent of righteous anger coursing through his veins.

*Must everything I care about be stripped away?* Ari demanded silently.

First his humanity—then his family—then Liliath . . . Now, in spite of his best efforts, his guest was going to leave him—leave him alone again to his maddening isolation. Yet it was the stranger's callous theft that had abruptly catalyzed Ari's misery into rage. How dare he steal one of his precious roses! For years, he had struggled to find and nature them and make them grow. His roses were all he had left to care for anymore! Must he let this injustice stand? No—no, it was too much!

"Earlier, you said you owed me a debt," Ari snapped. "Your crime here confirms it. You took the life of my rose, so now your life shall be mine in its place. You shall never leave my lodge again."

“B–But it is just a rose!” the man protested, aghast. “A flower such as might be found anywhere.”

“Then you should have taken it from somewhere else! Debtors and thieves belong in prison, and you are guilty on both counts.”

The man prostrated himself in panic. “Please, My Lord, have mercy! I did not take it for me—my daughter—her name is Rose—she has never seen one before. I told her I would bring one back for her. Please do not punish me for indulging her small whim.”

“Your daughter’s name is . . . Rose?” Ari asked, incredulous. For a moment, his anger was forgotten as a small stirring of hope threaded through his soul.

It had been nearly a decade since Liliath’s father had scried for a way to end Ari’s curse—yet Ari recalled the event as clearly as if it were yesterday. *A rose held by a girl who must love him unconditionally—only she could break his spell.* What was the chance that after years of isolation, the one man he encountered would have a daughter by that name? It was too much of a coincidence.

The man nodded, too terrified to meet his gaze, so he did not see Ari bare his teeth in an excited grin.

“A Rose for a rose then—that is fair. I will spare your life in exchange for your daughter’s.”

The man’s head snapped up, his eyes wide. “You would deflower my child?”

Ari glowered. “You may think me a beast, but I am not such a beast as that! She would be treated here as I have treated you—like a royal guest, not the loathsome prisoner you shall be should you decline my offer.”

The man shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks into his beard, but no words emerged, only half-choked sobs. As Ari listened to his wracked cries, shame began to heat his cheeks, its glow invisible beneath his dark fur. He growled softly, trying to dispel it.

*This might be the only chance I have to break my curse . . . or at the very least, to never be alone again,* he reasoned. Yet it was hard to hold firm to that conviction as he watched the stranger shake even harder, still unable to speak.

“I will make a bargain with you, thief,” Ari said at last, unable to bear the man’s grief any longer. “Return to your home. See your family. But in

one month's time, either you or your daughter must come back to me willingly. Swear it, and I will let you go!"

"I—I promise," the man choked.

"Then fetch your horse and begone from my land. Upon your return, a guide will be waiting at the crossroad to lead you the rest of the way."

The stranger nodded and scrambled to his feet. With one last look at Ari, he dashed off toward the stable.

For a moment, Ari watched him flee, then abruptly pivoted around toward the rosebush so he would not have to watch his guest leave. With his thick paw, he stroked the severed stem, feeling as broken as the branch he was caressing. The hope that had so briefly illuminated his future seemed to flicker and die within him. He had made his choice—he had let the man go. In spite of his promise, Ari knew he would never return.

A whimper escaped his throat, but Ari bit back the sound as the pounding of hoof beats thundered past. At the very last second, he turned to look and caught a glimpse of the man and his mount racing for the trees, the cloak Ari had lent him—his father's cloak, carelessly left at the lodge by King Tirell many years before—whipping through the air behind him as Ari was abandoned once more.

With no one to see or hear him, he allowed his tears to fall.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father is home!" Chase shouted, dashing from the house.

"What!?"

Adara and Rose both hastened to the window in time to see Mercer dismount from his horse at the gate. Instantly, they set aside their duties and ran out to greet him.

"My girls," he murmured in a husky voice, wrapping his arms around them and holding them close. "My precious, precious girls."

"It is good to have you home," Adara greeted, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

"Look at your fine clothes—fit for a king!" Chase exclaimed once he had released them. She fingered an embroidered sleeve. "You must have had great success."

The corner of Mercer's mouth twitched, and he did not answer her. Instead, he turned to Rose. "Here, this is for you," he said, digging into his

saddlebag and pulling out a slightly crushed flower. “A rose for my beautiful girl. Cherish it, sweet one, for it has cost me dearly.”

“Father, what is the matter?” Adara asked, her gaze intent and assessing. “It is clear there is something wrong.”

“I will tell you inside,” he said. “First, let me stable my horse.”

Mercer delayed until supper, when at last he explained the unfortunate events that had befallen him, starting with the truth about his ship and ending with his narrow escape from the beast.

“I am sorry I ever asked for the flower!” Rose blurted out when he had finished. “You were right, Chase, it was a foolish thing to fancy.”

“It is a little late for regret, Rose,” Tess chided, her arms crossed. “The question is what to do now.”

“There is no question,” Mercer sighed. “I gave my word, and a promise is a promise—I merely wanted to see you all one last time. When the month’s reprieve has passed, I will go back.”

“Nonsense!” Rose declared, rising to her feet. “It was my request that caused this terrible situation. It is I who must return.”

“Never!” her father exclaimed, horrified. “I will not sacrifice you in my place.”

“If Rose is willing to go, you must let her,” Tess said coldly, startling them all. “These girls have already lost their mother—they cannot lose their father too.”

Mercer glared at his sister, his expression furious. “Then I will move us all away to where the beast can never touch us.”

“You just said a promise is a promise,” Rose argued. “Whether to a beast or not, you cannot go back on your word.”

“Perhaps, we should discuss this later, when we have had a chance to more fully absorb the situation. We have a month after all,” Adara suggested softly, her clenched hands the only sign of her distress. “We need not settle the matter at this very moment. Let us instead rejoice that you are home safe and sound. Everything else can wait.”

“Very wise,” Tess nodded with approval.

The family rose and slowly began to clear the table. Mercer’s motions were rigid and his jaw was locked with conviction, in spite of Adara’s words. As Rose watched him from the corner of her eye, she felt her own expression hardening in response. No matter what he might think, her father was *not* going to pay for her foolish request—she would see to that!

## CHAPTER SEVEN



THE FAMILY SAT IN SILENCE near the dying hearth fire. It was long past the time they usually turned in for the night, but no one seemed to want to be the first to depart. This was Mercer's last evening at home. Tomorrow, he would return to the beast.

"Darren assures me he will help with the harvest," Mercer spoke up, his voice thick. "He is a good man. He will—he will take care of you."

Adara choked back a sob, and Chase sank onto the floor next to her father's chair, laying her head on his lap. Rose watched as Mercer stroked her sister's copper curls, his face contorted with grief.

"You should get some sleep, Mercer," Tess said at last. "You cannot fulfill your promise if you fall off your horse halfway there."

"You are right—I just . . . you are right."

Chase sat back to allow Mercer to get to his feet. He surveyed his small family, his eyes sparkling with unshed tears.



“Oh, Father!” Chase cried, flinging her arms around him in sudden abandon.

“You be strong,” he commanded, his voice tight as he hugged her back. When she let go, he moved to embrace the others, leaving Rose for last.

Rose looked up at her father and saw her own sorrow mirrored in his gaze.

“Hey, now,” he murmured, holding her close. “I know what you wish, but it is a parent’s right to sacrifice themselves for their child—not the other way around. Your future is here, with Darren,” he said.

Rose sniffled and buried her face in his chest. “I love you, Father,” she whispered.

Once Mercer had gone to bed, there seemed little point in remaining downstairs. One by one, the others trickled up to their rooms, until at last only Rose and Aunt Tess were left.

“You know I have to do this,” Rose said in a low voice, when it became clear that her aunt did not intend to leave her alone.

“Yes,” Tess agreed. Her expression softened. “That does not mean I have to like it.”

Together, they waited for the silence of slumber to fully descend on the house. At last, Rose stood and so did Aunt Tess. The movement woke Pesk, who had been sleeping by the hearth. He lifted his head and eyed Rose for a moment, then got to his feet with a yawn.

“Hush!” she hissed, glaring at the dog. “You need to stay here.”

Pesk just wagged his tail as Rose retrieved the small sack she had hidden beneath her mending, and then followed the two of them to the door. Rose hesitated. She dared not shut him in—experience said he would just scratch at the wood and bark until someone let him out. “You had better be quiet,” she instructed sternly, causing Aunt Tess to give a sad smile.

The night air was cold, and Rose shivered in spite of her thick shawl. A gibbous moon lit the fields with a spectral light, and the goat stirred as they neared its paddock, bleating in concern. Rose hurried past him into the stable.

The mare was standing in its stall, its head hanging low with sleep. It jerked awake as they entered and eyed Rose balefully, stomping one hoof in displeasure at the interruption.

Rose froze, unable to force herself to continue in its direction. She tried to reason with herself—if she was afraid to approach her father’s placid

nag, how would she ever be able to face the beast? Still, her feet refused to move.

“Let me,” her aunt offered, moving to saddle the horse. Rose sighed with relief and turned instead to remove a length of rope from the wall. She wrapped it twice around Pesk’s neck before tying its end to a rail.

“You have to stay here, Pesk,” she said, ruffling the dog’s neck and scratching behind its ears. Knowing she would never see her irksome companion again was surprisingly difficult, but it was better than taking him along to potentially be eaten by the beast.

“Keep him here until tomorrow, all right?” she told her aunt. “I do not want him to try to follow me.”

Tess nodded and led the horse from its stall, holding the reins with one hand as she stretched out the other to embrace Rose.

“You have always done the right thing, even when it was hard,” she said. “Your bravery is beyond measure. I am proud of you.”

Rose swallowed down the sudden lump in her throat, willing herself to stay strong. Words of praise from her aunt were rare indeed.

“The beast has promised to be good to me,” she whispered. “I will be fine.”

Aunt Tess nodded and stepped back, dashing a tear away with her hand. “I pray you are right.”

She held the horse steady while Rose tied her sack to the saddle horn with shaking hands. Heart thudding painfully in her chest, Rose tried to gather the courage to mount. Somehow, she succeeded in pulling herself onto the horse’s back, though the mare shifted uncomfortably beneath her legs, sensing her fear. Aunt Tess handed over the reins.

In spite of herself, Rose could not help glancing toward the distant forest. Despite her confident words to her aunt, she was far from certain what fate the beast had in store for her. Most likely, she would never see her home again.

“Take care of my family,” she choked out, echoing her father’s earlier charge.

“You have my word.”

With difficulty, Rose kicked the horse into a walk, then a trot as she reached the moonlit road. Tugging hard at the reins, she managed to turn the horse toward the forest. The thought of entering those dark woods was

almost enough to make her turn back, but she steeled herself against her fear. She *would* take her father's place. A promise was a promise.

Alone in the stable, Pesk whined after his mistress and gave two sharp barks. When she did not return, he turned and began to chew on the rope.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everyone turned to look at Mercer as he shuffled into the village meeting hall. His shoulders were stooped as though by great age, and his eyes were bloodshot, his face haggard. Behind him followed the rest of his family, their eyes swollen from weeping. Darren Woodsmith was with them as well, his features looking just as gaunt.

The steward frowned. He had summoned this meeting as a precaution, hoping to dispel the rumors that were plaguing the town, but judging by the family's appearance, there might be some truth to them after all.

"Where is Rose?" he demanded abruptly, leaning forward in his chair from where he sat on the dais at the head of the assembly. Mercer just stared at him.

"Tell us the truth!" a voice shouted from the back. "Was it really a beast that took her?"

"Who told you such a thing?" Tess challenged, folding her arms and glaring at the speaker.

The steward silenced them both with a wave of his hand. "Matthew Cooper, tell us what you heard," he instructed.

A young man near the front turned to face the other villagers, drawing himself up to his full height and gazing out at the assembly with arrogant pride. "Right gladly, honorable steward. I was passing by Mercer's cottage when I saw him dash outside, shouting like a madman. He yelled, 'Would that I had never seen my daughters again, rather than to pay such a price. The beast cannot have my Rose!' Then he took off running down the road toward the forest. That was yesterday morning."

The steward looked at Mercer skeptically. "This afternoon, George Farmer saw you emerge from the forest tattered and weary—on a horse you did not have upon entering—but otherwise quite alone. Rumors have been flying ever since, and I mean to lay them to rest. I ask again, where is Rose?"

“In the hands of a terrible creature,” Mercer whispered, tears streaming down his cheeks. “A monster of the forest.”

“I *knew* it!” a woman exclaimed. “You see? I told you such creatures still existed! One of them surely killed my husband—maybe even the same one! All I know is, he went into the woods one day and never returned.”

“Yes, he did,” a snide voice snickered. “He just never returned to you.”

“If this creature went after Rose, what is to stop it from attacking our village?” another voice cried.

“What if there are more of them? My grandfather saw a griffin once—he just barely managed to escape! Who knows how many foul creatures are still lurking in that forest from when the fairies brought them over long ago?”

“We must hunt down this beast and take Rose back!” Darren declared, his face distorted with anguish.

“No!” Mercer rasped, rounding on the younger man. “I told you, you must not! You do not understand—you were not there—” The assembly fell silent, captivated by the grief-stricken father. Mercer tried again. “This creature—he is a thing out of legend. Magic surrounds him and his abode. If we pursue him, more lives will surely be lost. The beast already has my daughter. I cannot bear to have anyone else’s blood on my hands as well.”

“You would let this creature continue to steal our young?” a shrill voice demanded.

“Nonsense,” the steward interrupted loudly, seizing back control of the meeting before it could descend into all-out panic. “We all know the tales surrounding the forest, but none of its denizens have ever bothered our village before—most likely because we have never bothered them. Mercer should not have ventured into this beast’s abode.”

“Is that why you brought him here—to condemn him?” Tess retorted. “The man just lost his daughter! Leave him—leave *us*—in peace.”

“A daughter is not all your family has lost,” Michael Tanner cruelly asserted, pushing his way to the front of the crowd. “First your husband died in a freak accident, then your brother lost his ships and his fortune as well. Now this! What ghastly did you offend back in Nathar to earn such a curse on your family?”

“How dare you!” Tess exclaimed, outraged. “Have you no shame, to mock my family’s afflictions?”

“I am in deadly earnest,” Tanner replied. Raising his voice even louder, he cried, “I will not commerce with a man under a curse!”

“That is ridiculous,” Jon Crofter countered, speaking up for the first time. “We all know of Mercer’s kindness—he would never do anything to earn a curse. We should support him in this tragedy, not reject him.”

Jon’s gaze met Adara’s, and she shot him a look of gratitude.

Tanner narrowed his eyes, but steward forestalled his rebuttal by raising his hand.

“This is not about a curse—this is about the safety of our village,” he asserted. “Everyone is to stay out of the forest or risk meeting the same fate as Rose. That is all.”

He signaled the meeting was dismissed, and most of the villagers began to disperse, some conversing urgently among themselves while others cast pitying—or suspicious—glances at the devastated family. A few people hung back to commiserate with the sisters, while a couple of busybodies lingered in the hopes of obtaining further gossip.

The steward sighed and stood, feeling oddly exhausted. Prudence had demanded that he take the cautious course, but his choice left him feeling horribly hollow. As he panned the departing crowd, his eyes locked with Darren Woodsmith’s, and the lad’s desperate, half-crazed gaze clearly announced that he, at least, had no intention of heeding the steward’s warning.

Slowly, the steward nodded his permission to the youth and gave him a slight smile. He hoped he would succeed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tess stepped out of the meeting hall, knowing her composure would shatter if she remained there any longer. Hastily, she strode around the side of the building, eager to be out of sight. She was not a moment too soon as the tears she had repressed all day began to stream down her face.

*Rose, Rose, forgive me. I need your father to sustain this family. Letting you go was the only way I knew to make him stay.*

As she rounded the back of the building, she was startled by the sight of two sweethearts in each other’s arms. Tess froze and was just about to turn away when one of them spoke, and she realized it was Adara.

“S—So you see, I cannot p—possibly marry you now.”

Tess drew back in surprise, her tears momentarily forgotten. She had no idea Adara even had a beau, let alone one she had agreed to wed! Curious, Tess shrank back behind the corner, listening intently to her niece's conversation.

"My dear Adara, do you think having no dowry matters to me? Your father's misfortunes do not change how I feel. It just means I will have to work that much harder to save enough to support you on my own."

"But that will take f-forever."

"Then I will wait forever," the lad replied. Tess recognized him as the one who had spoken up in Mercer's defense—what was his name? Jon Crofter.

"It hardly matters. I cannot l-leave my father now, not when Rose is—Rose is gone," Adara's voice cracked as she let out a shuddering sob.

"I know. I understand. But someday, the time will be right for your father to let you go, and I will be waiting."

Tess turned away as the two embraced each other again, her mind whirling with renewed purpose.

*So Adara wishes to wed the Crofter boy. Well, we shall have to see about that.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT



ROSE WAS SO AFRAID, she could scarcely think. Every shift the horse made sent a frisson of fear shooting through her until her chest throbbed from the pounding of her heart, and her mouth was so dry she could scarcely swallow. She clutched at the reins as though they might somehow keep her from falling off, and her legs ached from gripping the horse's sides so tightly. Yet her fear of the mare was nothing compared to her terror of what lay ahead.

Rose did not know where she was to go once she reached the crossroad, but for now there was only one path from her village she could follow. The trail seemed to narrow the further she traveled into the woods, and at times the branches drew so close that they brushed against her legs on either side. Thankfully, the placid mare seemed to handle such intrusion well—but each feathery brush made Rose freeze in her saddle, certain that something had

just tried to grab her. Futilely, she would strain to see through the darkness, but only thin slivers of moonlight penetrated the black forest, and every shadow seemed to hide a basilisk behind it; every low-hung branch that caught her hair was a manticore swooping in for the kill.

She rode like that for what seemed like hours—long enough for the moonlight to fade and a deep violet sky to take its place. In another hour, it would be morning and her family would wake. How long until they realized she was not there?

The horse suddenly stopped, and Rose realized they had reached a fork in the road.

*What now?* Rose wondered, her gaze searching the dark silhouettes for her guide. *Father said he would be met at the crossroad, but there is no one here.* For the first time since her father had returned from his trip, Rose felt a small surge of hope. If her guide did not come, she would still have fulfilled *her* part of the promise. How long need she wait before she could guiltlessly turn back for home?

Hesitantly—praying no one would answer—she called out, “I am Rose, come in place of my father. Is anyone there?”

A light flashed on amidst the trees, and Rose’s heart plummeted with disappointment. Squinting against the shine—painfully bright after a night in the dim woods—she could just glimpse the outline of a lantern, though the thick grey-green foliage concealed whoever held it. As she stared, the light started to drift away from her and then paused, as though it were waiting for her.

“Am I supposed to follow you?” Rose asked weakly.

The lantern bobbed up and down.

She swallowed hard. The light did not come from either path, but instead from the dense woods that lay between the two—woods that were much too thick for a horse to traverse. Carefully, she dismounted from the mare and untied her sack from the saddle horn.

“Go back home,” she commanded in a voice that shook despite herself. As much as she disliked animals, the horse had been her only guard against the unknown. Now she had to leave even it behind. “Go on, now.”

The mare just stared at her blandly.

Summoning the shredded remains of her courage, Rose picked up the reins and dragged the horse’s head around until it faced back the way it had



come. Then she reached out and lightly slapped the mare's flank. It took a few steps, then stopped, looking back at her skeptically.

"Oh, do what you will!" Rose exclaimed, tears springing to her eyes. "I must go."

The sky had lightened enough for her to clearly see the grey-green foliage she would have to hike through, but she still could not make out the person who was to guide her. All she could see was the lantern waiting in the distance. As soon as she turned to face it, the light started off again into the brush, and Rose picked her way carefully behind it. Her pace was ponderously slow, and she had to stop often to detangle her dress from the plants that hemmed her in. Whenever she paused, the light would halt as well, though it never drew close enough for her to see who carried it.

"How much further must we go?" she asked at one point, but received no answer. The apprehension roiling in her stomach only increased with the prolonged silence, and more than once Rose was certain she was going to be sick. Surely if the beast meant well by her, his guide would not be so reticent. Was he reluctant to create a rapport with someone who did not have much longer to live?

*No! The beast told my father I would be treated well*, she tried to reassure herself, but the ominous quiet seemed to mock her attempt.

Rose walked in silence after that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari stared down through the slats of the rafters, panting slightly from his hasty ascent. He scarcely noticed his discomfort, however—all his attention was riveted on the girl. Twigs and leaves stuck to her hair, but they were unable to dim its strands of burnished gold. She looked exhausted and stumbled as she entered the lodge, but she quickly pulled herself erect. Her chin was held high with seeming confidence, but even from this distance, Ari could smell the fear rolling off her.

Shame swept over Ari. He had never truly expected the man to keep his promise—certainly did not think he would deliver up his child in his place. What kind of father would sacrifice his offspring to further his own ends?

*Mine did*, he remembered bitterly.

"Hello?" the girl called, her voice trembling. "Are you—is anyone there?"

Her voice was like birdsong, sweet and clear. Ari felt his soul surge at the sound, and he closed his eyes.

“What is your name?” he boomed down, even though he knew. Compared to the pure chime that was her speech, his voice was rough and guttural, barely comprehensible at all.

The girl’s head shot up and her gaze raked the ceiling, but he knew she could not see him through its slats.

“R–Rose, My Lord,” she stuttered.

Ari winced. He had never felt less noble.

“Do not call me, ‘Lord,’” he instructed. “I am a beast, and Beast is what you shall call me.”

“Y–yes, sir.”

He peered through the cracks at her face and found he could not look away. “Your father forced you to come in his stead?” he demanded harshly.

“Never!” she exclaimed, aghast. Shock made her voice strong. “He would never do that! I came of my own free will and without his consent. I would trade my life for my father’s.”

Ari felt even worse. “You would be my prisoner here forever?”

He heard her swallow hard. “As long as that, yes.”

Her decision shook Ari. He could not keep her here. It was wrong. *He* was wrong to have made the demand in the first place. Yes, he was lonely—desperately so—trapped in an accursed exile and forsaken by his family, but that did not excuse him of robbing another of their freedom. He would have to send this girl away . . . but not today. She was wavering on her feet as it was.

“You have had a trying journey, Rose. Go upstairs and rest now. This lodge and all that is in it are yours to command. As am I,” he added in sudden decision.

She nodded slowly, her expression confused. “Shall I see you before I do?”

“No,” he snarled his refusal. “You shall never have to bear that burden.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rose trudged her way up the staircase, uncertain what to make of the beast—Beast, she corrected herself. He had not been at all what she was expecting. A cruel creature with stumbling speech, perhaps—not one that

could talk as ably as a man and which refused to show itself to spare her the sight. And what had he meant by “the lodge was hers to command?”

Trying to make sense of it all when she was so fatigued was nearly impossible, and it made Rose’s head hurt to try. Instead, she opened the door to the room that the Beast had directed her to—the first one on the right.

Magnificence awaited her. A cherry-wood bed lined the right wall, its drapes and coverlet a rich crimson color. Rose reached out and felt the cloth—it was thick but incredibly soft, made of a material for which she knew no name. A large window let in streams of sunlight, and underneath it stood a beautiful cherry wood dressing table with bronze edging and a stool to match. A fireplace took up half the wall opposite the bed and possessed a bronze mantle as well.

*If this is a measure of things to come, perhaps being a prisoner here will not be so bad,* she comforted herself.

A slight scraping sound made her pivot around, and Rose had to stuff a fist in her mouth to stifle a scream. A basin so large that it chafed against the stone doorframe was edging its way into the room—but what startled Rose was that it was hovering at least two feet above the ground. No one was carrying it.

The basin settled itself onto the floor by her feet. In its wake, jugs floated into the room and dumped their contents of steaming water into the tub, then exited back out again.

*Magic, it must be magic,* her mind grasped.

Though the basin was extremely large, within minutes of its arrival, it was full. Rose touched the water tentatively. It felt deliciously warm and inviting. A soft thump directed her attention to a stool, which had repositioned itself near the basin. A towel and a washcloth were folded on top of it, leaving no uncertainty as to what she was meant to do.

“Very well,” she said quietly. Her eyes darted toward the ceiling, but it was solid stone, not wood—there was no way the Beast could be hiding up there.

Breathing a little easier, Rose walked over to the door and shut it. She wished there was a way to bolt it, but comforted herself that if the Beast wanted to invade her privacy, he already would have. It was not as if she could defend herself against him, after all.

Rose quickly doffed her dress and sank into the tub. She hissed as the water stung the scratches on her arms and legs—tokens of her trip through the woods—but she soon forgot her pain in the delight of a warm bath. Never in her life had she been treated to such luxury!

*Maybe the Beast just wants to ensure his dinner is clean,* she mused with dark humor, but even as she thought it, she felt her worry fading. The Beast had spoken kindly to her, and this room did not seem like the kind of place you would send someone you intended to kill. And he *had* promised her father she would be well taken care of. Though she had not been able to stop her mind from considering the horrific possibilities she might face, Rose no longer found herself quite so able to believe them.

With a sigh, she lay back in the water until it completely covered her head. The sensation was absolutely exquisite. All too soon, lack of air demanded that she surface, but Rose kept her eyes closed as she did so, holding on to the delightful feeling of being cocooned in liquid warmth.

Something yanked sharply at her hair, and she sat straight up with a screech. At the same time, something else began to scrub brusquely at her shoulder.

“Stop it!” she cried.

Instantly, the actions ceased. Rose twisted around in the basin to find a comb and washcloth hovering in the air. She stared at them, and it seemed to her that they stared right back.

“Rose? Are you all right?” the Beast boomed from beyond the door, concern evident in his voice.

“Yes, quite,” she choked out in a high-pitched squeak. She tried again. “I am fine. Just getting accustomed to . . . things.”

A brief silence. “I see.”

His voice was strangely muffled, as though he was still talking through the ceiling of the entrance hall. Rose wondered exactly how sharp his hearing was, and lowered her voice to a whisper as she told the objects, “I prefer to wash myself.”

They seemed to sag midair in disappointment. How could objects appear unhappy?

“I will let you comb my hair when I am done,” she promised, and immediately the comb perked up and zoomed over to the dressing table where it settled down to wait.

A corner of the washcloth tilted her way, as though in hopeful expectation. "I suppose . . . I could use you if you did not move," Rose offered the washcloth, stretching out her hand. Instantly, it fell into her upraised palm and lay still.

Feeling rather disturbed, Rose hastily washed herself and rubbed the debris out of her hair. When she was done, the washcloth rose out of her hands, wrung itself out, and draped itself over the mantle to dry.

Rose caught herself staring at it again and shook her head, stepping out of the basin as she did so. Before she could bend down to pick up the towel, it rose off the stool and unfolded itself before her.

"Let me dry myself," she said nervously, taking the towel in her hands. It relaxed, acting for all intents and purposes like a normal bath cloth as she dried herself off. Perhaps that was what the Beast had meant when he said the lodge was hers to command—she just had to tell the objects what she wanted, and they would obey. She could handle that.

The towel seemed to wink at her as she dried, and Rose saw that the deep purple cloth was infused with silvery specks. She paused and looked at it closely, but could spy no hint of embroidering thread. How had a dyer managed to achieve such a consistent spangling of color?

Putting aside the puzzle for when she could think more clearly, Rose briefly debated what to do with the towel, feeling it would be disrespectful to simply let it collapse back onto the stool. The towel took the decision out of her hands by flying over to a peg on the wall—had that been there before?—and hanging itself up neatly by the fire.

*Do not think on it now*, Rose advised herself, shivering a little as she pulled out the spare outfit from her sack. Her old clothes would need both washing and mending before she could wear them again.

On the dressing table, the comb rattled an impatient reminder of her promise.

"No, I have not forgotten you," she called softly.

Rose settled down on the stool, and the comb carefully began the task of unsnarling her hair. It was very gentle, and Rose soon found herself nodding off to its soothing motions.

"Thank you," she mumbled when the comb tapped her shoulder to indicate it was done. "Thank you all."

The bed had already been folded down, and she slipped into it gratefully. The drapes descended around her to block out the late afternoon

light, and the covers pulled themselves up to her chin; Rose was too tired to protest their action as she drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER NINE



ROSE AWOKE to crimson drapes and sheets as soft as dandelion fuzz. For a moment, she thought she was still in a dream, before all at once remembering that her surroundings belonged to the Beast's forest lodge, and that her presence there meant she would never see her family or her home again.

Tears trickled out of the corner of her eyes, soddening the pillow underneath her head. Rose found she had to struggle to breathe, as though an invisible hand were squeezing her lungs. Desperately, she tried to concentrate on the knowledge that her father was safe at home, but misery

and panic were not so easily put aside. All she wanted to do was bury her face in her pillow and sob, but she feared that if she did, she might never stop.

Seeking a diversion, Rose tried to sit up and let out a gasp of pain—the motion had sent bolts of fiery agony shooting through her back and legs. She sank back down against the pillows and her discomfort eased a little, but her body still throbbed from the unaccustomed strain having ridden a horse. Rose shifted a little and flinched; a tender touch to her backside told her she had saddle sores as well.

Gritting her teeth, Rose managed to force herself out of bed. The light in the room was brighter than it had been when she had fallen asleep, and Rose realized with a shock that she had slept not only all night, but all morning as well. She had never been allowed to stay in bed past dawn her whole life—to have done so now just reminded her further how much her life had changed.

Uncertain what to do, Rose cast a helpless glance around the room, only to have her attention recaptured by the window. Yesterday, she had been too overwhelmed to pay much attention to it, but now she saw that it was not simply a peasant's hole in the wall which could be shuttered closed, nor was it a pane of translucent animal horn such as only the rich could afford. Instead, the window was made of glass so clear, it was hard to believe it was there at all.

Fascinated, Rose drew nearer to the window, intent on a closer examination. As she approached it, however, the comb on the dressing table in front perked up in anticipation.

"In a minute," Rose instructed, her mouth quirking a little at how quickly she was becoming accustomed to objects that moved about on their own.

With the tips of her fingers, she gently touched the window pane. The glass was cool and smooth, with crafting so perfect she could find no bubble, no flaw in its construction.

The view it framed was just as impressive. Verdant grass stretched out to the tree line an acre away. Between the forest's edge and the lodge shone the waters of a small pond, and to its right, Rose could see a garden all abloom. Suddenly, she shivered and drew back from the window as she realized what species of flower that must be.



Wincing at the aches in her body, Rose sat down tenderly upon the stool, and the comb eagerly began to work order into her sleep-mussed hair. As she waited for it to finish, Rose examined the objects on the dressing table with interest.

There was a box of cedar wood that possessed a faint, pleasant scent—it reminded her of Darren, when he would come to visit her after spending a day in the woods cutting timber. This time, Rose could not stop the tears from welling in her eyes.

*Darren, Darren, I will never see you again, and I could not even risk bidding you farewell.*

Sniffing a little, she wiped away the tear tracks and opened the lid of the box. Her eyes widened as she stared at its contents. Hairpins encrusted with rubies and diamonds filled the contours of the case, worth enough to feed her entire village for a year. Rose's hands trembled at the bounty she held, and she carefully set the box back down before she could drop it.

To the right of the box was a hand mirror which, like the window pane, had neither warp nor distortion in its glass. Never before had Rose seen her face in such perfect detail, and she stared at herself for a long moment, noticing as if for the first time the clarity of her blue eyes and the starkness of the scars running down her cheeks.

To the left of the box was a pitcher of water and an empty ceramic washbowl for cleaning her face, as well as an embroidered cloth for patting it dry. Rose eyed the cloth nervously, hoping it would not get any ideas about scrubbing her skin, but it did not move from its spot.

The comb gave one last stroke of her hair and settled back down onto the table. Rose reached up and ran her fingers through her hair in assessment—the strands parted easily beneath her touch.

"Thank you," she said with sincere gratitude. "You have done a fine job."

The comb quivered a little as if in glad acknowledgement and then lay still.

Rose automatically began to spin her hair up into the bun in which she normally wore it, but paused, remembering that the only tools she had to pin it in place were covered in a king's ransom of jewels. Part of her wanted to see what her hair would look like so bedecked, while another part warned that it was wrong for a peasant to wear such finery—dressing above one's station was a crime, after all.

*Who is there to arrest me here?* she thought wryly. *I am already a captive.*

Removing several pins from the box, Rose began to put up her hair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carefully, Rose hobbled down the stairs, one hand braced against the side of the wall for support. The entrance corridor stretched out before her and closed doors extended off to either side. Curious, Rose placed her hand against the first door on her right and pushed, revealing a kitchen in motion. Knives sliced and diced various vegetables, then expertly flicked them into a stew while avoiding the spoon that was slowly stirring.

Rose watched for a few minutes, fascinated, until her stomach growled an impatient reminder that she had not eaten for a full day. "If it is not too much trouble, might I have a piece of bread? I promise not to let it ruin the supper you are making," she ventured, but the kitchenware paid her no heed.

"You must command them," a voice rumbled from beyond the corridor's ceiling. Rose froze, too afraid to look up. The very sound of the Beast's speech made her tremble, and it was all she could do to hold her ground.

"You are their mistress while you are here," he continued. "Order them to fulfill your desires, and it shall be done."

"But that seems so rude," Rose protested, then covered her mouth, horrified she had dared contradict such a powerful creature.

"They are only objects. They have no feelings and cannot appreciate politeness as a human can. They do as they are told and nothing more."

His voice was scornful. Rose thought of the comb and the washcloth and how despondent they had seemed when she had initially refused their help, and could not agree with the Beast. She took her hands away from her mouth.

"Then why do some of them act on their own, even though the others wait for me to use them?" Rose inquired more boldly.

The rafters creaked above her head, and she glanced up before she could stop herself. Rose could see nothing, but it was disconcerting to know that the Beast was up there watching her.

“They know their purpose. Over time, some of them have grown to take initiative with it, while others have standing orders they must implement. Most, however, still need to be directed.”

“But what if they do not want to be directed? It seems unfair to force them to obey.” *Like you forced my father to obey when you made him promise to return.*

Though deep and harsh when he answered, the Beast’s tone sounded nonetheless puzzled. “It is their purpose to serve us. After all, what is a cloth for except to clean, or a comb for except to comb?”

“Maybe it would like to make music,” Rose replied sadly, the memory of her sweetheart playing his comb harmonica making her heart ache anew. She bit the inside of her cheek until the image faded and she had control over her emotions again. She would not show weakness in front of the Beast!

“I thought only fairies and ghashlies could wield magic,” she submitted, changing the subject.

The Beast was silent for a long moment. “There is much about magic that humans do not understand,” he replied at last.

The rafters creaked again. “Will you not come down?” Rose asked suddenly, startling herself with her request. “It cannot be comfortable for you up there, and it is awkward for me to talk to you this way.”

“Better awkward than terrifying. You would quickly regret your request, for what is once seen cannot be unseen,” he growled.

Rose hastily looked at the floor. “What do you want of me?” she asked helplessly.

The Beast did not answer. “How do you like your accommodations so far?” he inquired instead.

She swallowed and forced herself to answer calmly. “Very well. They are much finer than anything I have ever known.”

“Is that so?” His voice was curious.

She nodded, knowing he could see.

“Then I will leave you to enjoy them,” he declared. “You may explore as you wish. A bell will ring when it is time for supper.”

“Thank you,” Rose replied automatically, and then immediately chastised herself. She should not be thanking her captor! Yet the Beast’s treatment of her had thus far been civil—even kind. He could have locked

her in a cellar or killed her upon her arrival, but he had instead behaved very generously. Perhaps a little gratitude was not so terribly amiss.

*There are men out there far more beastly than he, she decided slowly, and I do not want to spend the rest of my days living in fear. So unless he gives me cause to act otherwise, I will try to be pleasant and find happiness here. Better to treat this all like a grand adventure than to fret about a past I cannot change and a future I cannot control.*

Her new determination was punctuated by another growl from her stomach, but in spite of what the Beast had said, Rose could not bring herself to demand to be fed. Supper would be soon—she could wait until then. In the meaning, she would follow the Beast's suggestion and explore.

Rose opened the door next to the kitchen and found a buttery full of wine casks and candles. The door after that revealed a pantry bursting with flour sacks, trunks of cloth, spare dishes, and other provisions. Across the corridor was a huge hall with a roaring fire and a long trestle table—doubtless this was where her meals would be served. The final room downstairs was a trophy chamber decorated with animal heads, crimson wings, strings of fangs, and other such displays. Feeling slightly nauseated, Rose quickly closed the door.

Moving a little easier now that she had walked around a bit, Rose ascended the stairs once again. Her bedroom lay down the passage to the right, so she decided to first explore the passage on the left.

She gasped as she pushed open the door to the first room. The chamber was carpeted in thick rugs and a fire roared merrily in the grate, but it was the abundance of instruments that had her clasping her hands with pleasure.

Some, like the lute and recorder, she recognized on sight from village festivals. Others, like the harpsichord and viol, she had never seen before but knew what they must be from her father's stories. Still others were completely new to her, and she stared around at them in awe.

A graceful instrument—taller than she was—drew her eyes. It had a triangular body with vertical strings that decreased in length the closer they got to its stem. The black wood was polished to a scintillating sheen, and its strings appeared to be made of pure gold.

Scarcely daring to approach such a majestic instrument, Rose carefully settled herself upon the stool that stood just behind it. The instrument's back slanted awkwardly toward her face, and she wondered how she was supposed to reach the strings around it. After pondering for a moment, she

leaned to the left so that her face rested next to the stem instead of behind it, and then tentatively ran her hands across the strings. A rippling sound flowed from the instrument, and laughing a little in delight, Rose did it again. The gentle susurrations stirred in her the desire to sing, but she had no idea how to play the notes she would need to accompany her voice.

Instead, she contented herself with plucking the strings and listening to their soft harmonies for a while, before leaving it to test out the harpsichord. She giggled at the lively sound it produced—so different from the device she had just played! It was easier for her to pick out familiar notes on the harpsichord, and she even managed to play a three-pitched song.

After that, Rose moved from instrument to instrument, plucking, blowing, striking, and otherwise testing the wealth of musical devices arrayed before her. She could not recall the last time she had enjoyed herself this much.

“I wish I knew how to play you properly,” she murmured aloud. “I would love to be able to sing along to your accompaniment.”

The instrument beneath her fingers seemed to hum for a moment in response to her words.

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “I may not know how to play, but you do. Oh, would you?”

The instrument hummed again but did not otherwise make a sound.

“Right,” Rose realized. “I am supposed to command you.” She hesitated, but her desire to sing was stronger than her reluctance to dictate an order. “If you know how, please play for me *A Glorious Day to Shine*.”

The instrument obligingly gave a tumbling cadence and then launched into her favorite melody.

“How delightful! All of you play along,” Rose ecstatically cried.

Music swelled around her, a glorious blending of sound such as she had never heard before. Rose closed her eyes, forgetting for a moment all of her sorrows and fears and losing herself to the song.

“Wake all you people, rise up from your beds,” she sang in a clear, strong voice. “The sun is a-gleaming on all sleepy heads. ’Tis a glorious day to shine! Rise now and make it thine. Hard work and good cheer will abound with us here. ’Tis a glorious day to shine!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Hidden in the corridor rafters, Ari sat spellbound by the chorus of instruments and song wafting up through the slats. How he wished that the rafters could extend into the room where Rose was singing! But only the hall obeyed the design of his will—the other chambers were a law unto themselves, and he could no more change their design to fit his desire than he could break his curse on his own.

Instead, he crouched low and pressed an ear to the floor in order to better listen to the girl's pure, sweet voice. It was simply exquisite, and Ari felt a sharp pain in his chest as though her words were knives carving their way into his heart.

*You need to let her go*, a part of him rebuked, but this time Ari shied away from the thought, seeking any reason to tell it no.

*She is unable to travel—she was limping today. Besides, she came of her own free will. She promised to stay*, he argued.

*It is not right*, his conscience insisted.

“So condemning me to a life of solitude is?” Ari growled.

Unaware of his inner battle, the beautiful voice sang on.

## CHAPTER TEN



THE CHIMING of a discordant bell interrupted the music, calling Rose to supper.

“Thank you,” she told the instruments. “You may stop playing now. Perhaps we can do this again tomorrow.”

The instruments fell silent, and Rose left the room feeling more cheerful than she had since her father had returned home.

There was only one place setting laid out in the hall, and Rose felt even better knowing the Beast would not be joining her. Still, she shot a quick

upward glance toward the ceiling, but like the other rooms, it was made of stone—the Beast would be unable to observe her from there.

Rose settled into a large wooden chair, stroking the armrests in fascination. Her family did not own any chairs—only stools and benches—but she had seen the one reserved for the village steward in the town meeting hall. Unlike that austere piece, this chair possessed not only armrests, but also an embroidered cushion to soften its hard seat.

Rose's attention shifted to the bowl in front of her, which was made out of polished wood rimmed with gold. The inside was lined with gold as well, and the outside was intricately carved with vines and flowers. A goblet, similarly made, had already been filled with dark red wine. Behind the goblet stood a silver tureen that was emitting thin wafts of steam from the edges of its cover.

"Allow me," Rose instructed politely, lifting the lid and ladling the stew it revealed into her bowl.

The stew was thick and rich, with large pieces of meat in addition to the standard mix of vegetables. She plucked out a piece of meat and tried it—the savor was gamey, with a strong aftertaste that was surprisingly pleasant. Rose thought the wild flavor might be venison, but since only nobles (and beasts, naturally!) were allowed to hunt deer, she had never tried it before and could not be sure.

A loaf of bread was resting nearby, and Rose cut herself a piece. It was light and moist, without the coarse texture or bits of grit that were characteristic of the flour ground at her village's mill. She used the bread to sop up the stew and scoop the meat and vegetables into her mouth, relishing in such fine fare.

The quality of the food was so great that in spite of barely having eaten all day, Rose soon found herself growing full. The rushlights along the walls had lit themselves during her meal, and when she glanced out the window, she could see nothing but her own reflection against the darkness.

Content, Rose stood and pushed her chair in so that the armrests just touched the edge of the table. As soon as she did, the supper dishes rose of their own accord and drifted out of the room.

Feeling oddly superfluous, she followed the dishes into the corridor and then to the kitchen, where they were piling themselves into a large stone sink already filled with water.



“Thank you for the meal,” she addressed the room at large. “It was absolutely delicious!”

The kitchen gave no sign of overt acknowledgement, but Rose fancied it was pleased.

Night had fallen, and even though she had woken late in the day, she was still tired and made her way back up to her bedroom. When Rose opened the door, however, she thought she had entered the wrong chamber. Instead of crimson and bronze, a deep purple décor met her eyes. She stepped back out again and closed the door, then looked carefully up and down the corridor. This *was* the first chamber to the right. Puzzled, she opened the door again, and this time the purple décor had been replaced by furnishings of gold.

*More magic*, she marveled, and quickly stepped into the bedroom before it could change again.

A bathing basin was full and waiting, its water kept warm by several stones that were alternately heating themselves in the fire and then dipping themselves into the tub. As she neared, those still in the water lifted themselves out, and all returned to their place in a bucket by the fire.

“Another bath?” she laughed lightly. “I have hardly had the opportunity to get dirty.” Still, the thought of a hot soak was welcome indeed, and if part of living here meant she got to have one each day, Rose was not going to complain.

After she had refreshed herself and the comb had finished restoring her hair, Rose meandered around the room, examining its changed features with interest. The dressing table from that morning was gone, replaced by a window seat covered in an intricately embroidered cushion that depicted a knight on a hunt.

On the wall near the door stretched an array of shelves bearing gold statues as long as her forearm. Rose tried to lift one for a closer look, but found she could not—it was too heavy. She leaned forward instead and let her gaze rove over the figures. There was a man in a regal crown and an elegant woman with a weary expression. There were fairies and youths, and one statue that was too horrible to look at for long. Rose knew it had to be a ghastly and wondered why such a beautiful room would possess such a repulsive figurine.

Next to the ghastly was the statue of a young man who seemed at first glance to be particularly striking, but whose face was contorted with such

emotion that Rose found it nearly as difficult to gaze upon as the ghastly. Averting her eyes, she looked instead at the final statue on the shelf. Her breath caught as she recognized the familiar eyes, the cascading hair, and the twin scars etched upon the statue's cheeks.

"Impossible!" she choked, even as her hand scrabbled urgently for the door. She found the door ring and pulled, stumbling ungracefully from the room. Slamming the door shut behind her, Rose slumped against it in relief.

*How can there be a statue of me? It has to be the magic. But why?*

Rose's mind whirled with potential answers, each more frightening than the next. Did all those figures represent people who had suffered a fate similar to her own? Was she merely the latest in a long line of captives of the beast?

A shudder ran through Rose as her mind flashed back to the contorted face of the young man. What must he have endured to make him look that way?

Rose glanced toward the corridor window, wishing she dared to flee the Beast's lodge and all that it contained. She had begun to hope that afternoon that life here might not be so bad, but the statue had reminded her sharply that this was not her home, nor was she the guest of some generous if unseen lord. A Beast ruled here, and who knew what terrors he might have in store?

The rafters creaked overhead, and Rose suddenly knew that the Beast was watching her again. Panic seized her anew, and before he could say anything, she hastily threw open her bedroom door. To her relief, the golden interior was gone and its adornments were now varying shades of blue, with nary a shelf nor a statue to be seen.

With a sigh that was almost a sob, Rose sealed the door shut behind her and without further delay, climbed into bed. Drawing the covers up over her head, she curled inside their soft cocoon as though the fragile sheets could somehow protect her from this strange place. Slowly, her breathing steadied and she gradually stopped shaking, but it was a long time before she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rose deliberately slept late the next morning, and even after rising, she lingered in her room until a crystalline chime pealed through the lodge,

announcing that dinner was ready. Knowing there was no point in further delaying the inevitable, Rose drew in a deep breath and tiptoed out into the corridor.

She had just made it to the head of the stairs when the Beast's voice boomed out, "Good morning."

Despite being on guard for his presence, the Beast's sudden greeting—a harsh snarl, in spite of its gentility—made Rose jump.

"G—Good morning," she stuttered, the anxiety that had haunted her all night making her voice crack.

"I am glad to see you up and well. I was concerned for you last night. Was everything all right?" the Beast inquired carefully.

"Perfectly well, thank you," Rose replied. As if she would dare answer otherwise!

"That is good," the Beast said. Rose nodded and began to descend the stairs, but the Beast persisted, "I would like to watch you dine, if that is agreeable with you. Just during dinner. I will not bother you any other time."

Rose froze. "I thought you said I would not ever see you?"

"Nor will you now. I will watch you from the rafters, as I am doing here."

*And that is disturbing enough,* Rose thought, but she dared not refuse him. "As you wish. My life is at your command."

"No, Rose. It is mine which is at yours."

His response confused Rose, and she mentally shook her head, unable to fathom the Beast's intent. How could a creature who demanded her captivity speak to her so civilly, even servilely? It made no sense—but then, nothing about this place did.

Choosing not to reply, she finished stepping down the stairs. The groaning of the rafters overhead told her that the Beast was moving as well.

"Do you not dress for dinner?" he inquired abruptly.

*To what purpose?* Rose almost asked. Instead, she said, "I only own one other dress, and it is even less suitable than this."

The Beast gave a rumble that could have been either irritation or repressed laughter. "Then we must make you something more fitting."

They had arrived at the hall. Rose looked in and saw that the stone ceiling had been replaced by slats of wood, and understood now how the Beast would watch her eat without being seen. Did that mean he could

change *all* the ceilings to fit his will—had he perhaps changed hers while she was sleeping, or worse, observed her while she bathed?

“Are—can you change all the rooms?” she inquired timorously.

“No, just this one. The others are their own masters,” the Beast replied.

Rose breathed a little easier. She supposed he could be lying, but why would he? If he chose to spy on her, she could not stop him. There was no reason for him to tell her an untruth.

Feeling slightly calmer, she sat down at the table. The meal this time was wild fowl, dumplings dusted with cinnamon, stuffed pastries, and a bowl of pine nut candy mixed with raisins. Rose’s eyes widened at the abundance of exotic foods, and she wondered for a brief instant whether the Beast was there to ensure she ate properly—if his pleasantry was just a cover while he fattened her up for the slaughter.

Aware of his scrutiny through the slats of the ceiling, she served herself smaller portions than she might have done were she eating alone. Rose closed her eyes and bowed her head for a silent invocation, but was interrupted by a query from the Beast.

“What are you doing?”

Rose looked up in surprise. “Have you never seen someone give thanks before they dine?”

The Beast’s reply was soft and seemed laced with sadness, “It has passed beyond memory if I have. Besides, it has been many years since I have had something to truly give thanks for.”

Rose felt her heart soften slightly at his words, and some of the dread that had been haunting her all morning started to dissipate.

“Then I will give thanks for us both.”

The rest of the meal passed in relative silence, and Rose found it easy to pretend the Beast was not there at all. She was just taking a last sip of wine when suddenly he spoke up.

“Do you think you could be happy here?”

Rose nearly choked. Coughing, she set down her goblet and wiped her mouth with her sleeve, her mind scrambling for a response. What could she say that would not offend her captor?

“This place has many marvels, and I would be remiss indeed if I did not take pleasure from them,” she cautiously replied.

“I am glad,” the Beast said, and the abrupt groaning of the rafters made Rose imagine he had risen to his feet. “I will leave you now. Until

tomorrow.”

“Until tomorrow,” Rose replied, trying not to feel threatened by the promise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari felt almost cheerful as he curled up in the rafters to wait out the day. *She likes it here! She is pleased with the lodge. It is finer than anything she has ever known.*

These thoughts and more tumbled merrily through his head as Ari closed his eyes.

He had decided.

He would not give up his Rose.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



HOPING TO FORGET her anxiety in the calming balm of melody, Rose made her way back up to the Music Room. When she opened the door, however, a colossal balcony with white stone columns and upholstered settees met her gaze. Faint strains of music drifted through the air, but not one instrument remained to be seen.

*Naturally*, Rose thought with a tinge of bitterness, shutting the door again. She opened it once more, expecting the scene to have transformed, but to her surprise, the contents remained the same. She tried once more, but the balcony endured.

*I will have to ask the Beast about it tomorrow, she decided at last in disappointment. There must be a logic to the way these rooms change. Perhaps there is a way to get back the ones I like.*

Rose considered her other options. There were three more doors on this side of the staircase, and three in the corridor opposite, not counting her own bedroom. From the exterior, she could not tell what sort of chambers they might contain.

“Only one way to find out,” Rose declared, seizing the next door ring and pushing it open.

Magnificent stone ridges soared toward the sky, a maze of rusty reds, pale pinks, and tan stripes that seemed to curve and flow against the blue firmament like streams of water. Rose stepped toward one wall and gently touched it—the rough rock scraped against her fingertips, its gritty texture at odds with its silky appearance. Wind ruffled her hair as it wafted through the warren of rocks, whisking some strands from her bun to tickle against her neck.

For a moment, Rose wondered whether she had somehow been magically transported to a distant place, and she quickly spun back around the way she had come. To her relief, the door stood open right behind her, the corridor clearly visible on the other side.

With her eyes fixed on the door, Rose took a few cautious steps further into the room, one hand guiding her way as she rounded a bend in the rocks. The door seemed to follow her, and Rose breathed a little easier. As much as she might wish herself away from the lodge, she wished herself stranded in an unknown land even less.

Checking over her shoulder occasionally to make sure the door was still visible, Rose wandered through the labyrinth of stone, marveling at its splendor. In some places, the rocks were curved into hollows, while in others they were weathered into great arches that soared overhead in breathtaking beauty. At times, the walls drew close together in thin passages whose winding colors made Rose feel like she was at the center of a marvelous flower.

The splendor was overwhelming, and Rose found herself clasping her hands with the pleasure of it.

*Do you think you could be happy here?* the Beast’s question echoed softly through her mind.

All at once, she felt guilty, as though by appreciating the beauty of the place, she was somehow betraying her family. Yet surely that was foolish—surely they would not want her to spend her days here in misery. If they could see the grandeur of this rocky chasm, surely they would enjoy it as much as she did.

But they would never see it—and she would never see her family—or Darren—again.

It was as if the walls had suddenly closed in around her, suffocating her with the knowledge that she would never hear his loved ones' voices or feel their arms around her again. She was completely and utterly alone.

*I would trade a lifetime of splendor if it meant I might spend even one more day at home,* she wished silently, resting her head against the rough rock. For the first time since arriving at the Beast's lodge, Rose let herself truly cry.

After what seemed like hours—long after the gentle wind had dried her tears into nothingness and her eyes had ceased to sting—Rose finally returned through the door. It was strange and slightly disorienting to find herself suddenly back in the lodge, and she had to stand still for a moment to readjust to her surroundings. The golden rays streaming through the corridor window told her it was late afternoon. If she were at home, she would be helping to prepare the family's supper, but here she had no tasks to do—nothing to divert her mind from her situation except exploration.

"What wonders do you hold for me?" she asked softly as she opened the next chamber. A bright, sunlit room met her gaze. Large windows stretched across the far wall, allowing the daylight to enter and illuminate the room. Even so, there were still candles—actual candles, not just rushlights—burning in racks throughout the chamber. The floor was covered in cushions and rugs, but the walls were covered with shelves full of books.

Rose picked one volume at random off a shelf, caressing the smooth hide of its cover in amazement. Very gently, she opened the book, causing the parchment to crackle beneath her fingertips. Curling symbols covered the pages, their lines neat and perfectly spaced. The borders were beautifully decorated in a bevy of colors, and some even seemed to have been painted with gold.

Rose reverently placed the book back on the shelf and took down another. This time, there were ink pictures in addition to the symbols, and she flipped from page to page, examining the illustrations she found. The



first image showed a young woman dancing with a suitor, though Rose could not fathom why the lady's expression seemed so unhappy. Another picture showed the same woman in the process of cutting her hair, while a third drawing depicted a hooded figure clutching a bow. Rose wished she knew the story the book told, but the pictures were too infrequent for that, and Rose did not know how to read.

Reluctantly, she lay the book on a low table that was nearly obscured by the piles of cushions around it. It had to be nearly time for supper, and there was still one more room in the corridor she had yet to see—she wanted to peek inside it before the bell could call her to eat.

*Though if the rooms keep changing, I suppose I will need to explore them again and again,* she realized. *At least my life here will not be boring.*

Rose grasped the door ring for the final room and then withdrew her hand with a gasp. The ring was like ice, biting and harsh. Rose cast an uneasy glance out the window, but the sun was still well above the horizon. There was no reason the handle should be so cold.

“Perhaps, I imagined it,” she murmured out loud. Sure enough, when she gripped the door ring a second time, the metal was merely cool and no longer piercing to the touch.

*There, you see? Nothing odd at all,* Rose comforted herself. *You are letting this place get the better of you.*

Even so, she hesitated, finding herself oddly unwilling to open the door. Then the clear chime of a bell cut through her thoughts. Supper was ready.

*Just a quick glance,* Rose decided, opening the door before she could think better of it.

She gasped again, this time in delight. Clouds swirled around her as she stepped inside, their almost palpable wisps lit gold and pink and orange by the rays of an evening sun. Rose could see no floor beneath her feet, only amber mists and the occasional glimpse of blue sky. She felt as if she were flying!

“Rose, Rose! Get out of there!” a distant voice called. Rose turned to look toward the door, and in that instant, the clouds darkened and all light vanished from the room. Even the corridor was no longer visible.

“Beast!” she blamed, angry that he had destroyed such beauty. A high cackling filled the room, and Rose felt her anger shift into fear. That laugh was not the Beast's.

Wind whipped past her face so fast that it stole her air and left her dizzy. In the darkness, something struck her hard, and Rose cried out in pain. It struck her again and again like the buffet of a giant wing, and Rose tried to duck away, only to be jerked back as though something had her within its grasp.

“Beast!” she cried again, this time in desperation. She had recognized the darkness—the terror—the hurt. This was her Dream made real. Sharp claws raked down her face, and Rose screamed as her cheeks erupted in an agony of fire. She pulled away, and then she was falling, falling.

“Rose! Rose!” she thought she heard the Beast cry, but it was too late—there was no way he could save her now. She knew what was coming, and this was no Dream she could safely wake up from. This time when she hit the ground, she would die.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rose opened her eyes. She was lying on her bed, one hand resting beneath her head. Had it only been a dream after all?

No, it had been far, far too real. Her cheeks still ached with the memory of it, and as she sat up, she traced the path of the pain with her fingers, feeling anew the scars it trailed. Yet they bore no fresh injury, no new damage. When she took her hands away, no blood stained her fingertips. How could such hurt leave no physical trace unless it had been only in her head?

The floorboards creaked, and Rose froze as she realized someone else was in the room with her, hidden from view by the lowered bed curtains.

“B–Beast . . .” she choked out, fear turning her voice into a whisper. Still, he heard her.

“I am here, Rose. You need not be afraid.”

She sighed and relaxed against the pillows, strangely reassured by his deep growl.

“You—you saved me? You brought me back?” she asked.

“I did.”

“Who—*What* was in that room?”

The beast growled. “I do not know—I only know that it is an evil place. I meant to warn you about it. Forgive me.”

He sounded so wretched that Rose felt herself melt a little at his words, and she leaned forward in her bed.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” she offered.

If she peered closely, she thought she could see his outline through the fabric of the drapes.

“I did nothing worth thanking me for,” he protested.

Yes, his voice was definitely coming from that direction.

“That is not true,” she countered softly. Indeed, the Beast had been nothing but kind to her since she had arrived, and now he had saved her from a living nightmare. After all her worrying, the irony was not lost on Rose that she now found herself grateful for his presence in her room—as long as he was there, she knew that she was safe.

She wished she could tell him this, could look into his eyes and let him know how truly thankful she was. Perhaps it was the scare she had just experienced, but the thought of seeing the Beast no longer seemed so terrible.

As if he could sense her thoughts, the shadow beyond the curtain moved. “I should be going.”

“Wait!” she requested, and she heard him pause. In that moment, Rose reached out and threw back the curtain.

The Beast snarled in surprise and instinctively leapt back. Rose saw that he moved with the grace of a cat, but his body was big like a bear and covered in rippling black fur. He had no tail, and his face was oddly flat. His lips were bared back in a grimace, and his teeth gleamed disproportionately large.

“I—I—” Rose began, and then her gaze caught on a shred of meat snagged between two teeth. It was too much, and the room spun as for the second time that day, Rose fainted.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Rose came to, she was alone. The room was dark except for the starlight sparkling through the open curtains. Rose shivered, unprotected from the cool night air, and the shivers soon changed into sobs. Turning on her stomach, she wept into her pillow, grieving for her family, her sweetheart, and most of all for herself, trapped in an enchanted lodge with a beast.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



ROSE HAD NOT REALLY EXPECTED the Beast to show himself again—not after she had reacted so disgracefully to his appearance—but now he no longer spoke to her, either, and she could not even hear him moving around in the corridor rafters. Indeed, the only indication that he had not abandoned the lodge was the three resplendent dresses she had found on her bed the following evening.

“These are far too grand for me,” Rose gasped, eyeing the pearls and opals that decorated the fabric. Even one such jewel would be enough to keep her family out of poverty forever. “Please, if you will provide me with new clothes, make me something plainer.”

There was no indication that anyone had heard her, but the next day, Rose returned to find the dresses gone and three new gowns laid out before her. Their colors were rich and their cloth was of the finest weave, but they were unadorned except for some slight embroidery around the hem. Though

she thought them still too elegant by far, Rose knew it would be churlish to ask for anything simpler and accepted the gift with good grace.

Aside from that, though, Rose could almost imagine she were alone in the lodge. At first, she was grateful to be reprieved of interacting with the Beast, but after a while, she began to feel ashamed. He could not help the way he looked, and her fainting had been unforgivably rude.

Still, it was loneliness that weighed on her soul the most. After years of enduring the din of older sisters and a dictatorial aunt, she found the isolation of the lodge almost unbearable. Even the sound of the Beast's voice would have been welcome company.

Finally, by the fifth day, Rose had had enough. When she walked into the hall for dinner and saw a stone ceiling yet again, she hesitated, pursed her lips, and then stepped back out into the corridor.

"Beast!" she called in the certainty that he was close by. "I would speak with you."

The ceiling creaked.

"Yes, Rose?" the Beast responded, his voice strangely subdued.

"Look, I am *sorry* for my behavior the other day," she apologized firmly. "I had just wanted to thank you face to face, but I know I surprised you—you surprised me, too. You have to understand, I have been scared of animals ever since I was little, and the sight you was quite overwhelming. But I am resolved to you now. I will not faint again."

"You are not to blame," the Beast remarked. "I am hideous, I know. I should have left your chamber the instant I had laid you safe."

"You misunderstand," Rose protested. "I am glad you remained. I was foolish to react as I did. I wish to see you again."

"Never!" the rafters trembled with the depth of the Beast's refusal.

"You were the one who said that what was once seen could never be unseen—well, I have seen you, so you might as well come down."

"No."

"Please," Rose implored, some of her bravado giving way to desperation. "I—I do not wish to be alone anymore."

The Beast was silent.

"Very well," he said at last. "But you will regret it. Go back into the hall—I will meet you there."

Rose obeyed, reentering the hall in time to see the stone ceiling ripple and change into wood. A set of stairs descended from one corner, and Rose

wondered if that was how the Beast had gotten into the rafters in the first place.

The groaning of the beams overhead marked the Beast's progression from the corridor roof into the hall. She heard him reach the top of the stairs, and then all sound stopped. He did not appear.

"You can do it," Rose whispered, wondering briefly who was more scared in that moment—him or her.

Slowly, one foreleg emerged, then another. Rose trembled—she could not help it—but she stood her ground as the Beast began to make his way down the steps.

She focused on his feet—they were shaped like a dog's, but the front two paws each had a stubby digit that stuck out to the side like a thumb. Rose had never seen an animal with paws like that. Disturbed, she quickly transferred her gaze up to his legs. They were well muscled and looked almost normal . . . except for the two in the rear. She had expected them to bend backwards, like a dog's legs or a horse's, but all the Beast's legs clearly bent forwards, like a person walking on all fours.

His shoulder blades jutted out sharply as he moved, and Rose could clearly see the ridge of his spine under the Beast's fur. His chest was much broader than his hips and generously muscled, and his neck was strong and thick. Steeling herself, Rose lifted her gaze to see his face. The Beast's ears were curved and moved independently of each other, while his nose was squashed almost flat against his cheeks. His mouth was closed, and his eyes shone bright green as they met hers.

She inhaled sharply. Those eyes held such emotion, such clear evidence of thought, that she could hardly believe they belonged to an animal at all.

All too soon, he halted in front of her, and then to her surprise, the Beast pushed himself up on his hind legs until he towered over her. Rose felt her resolve waver and her vision start to fade at the sight, but she forced herself to stay conscious by concentrating only on the Beast's gaze, craning her head to look up at him until her neck cricked.

"C—Could you please come back down?" she quivered. Instantly, he fell back on all fours.

"I have frightened you," the Beast said, his muscles tensing as though he were about to bound back up the stairs.

"No! I mean, you did—you do—I just need a moment to get accustomed to you," Rose babbled. The Beast held very still. On all fours,

his head was level with hers. She looked again into those oddly human eyes and forced herself to breathe normally.

“There,” she said, attempting to keep her tone light. “You see, you do not frighten me anymore.”

The Beast opened his mouth as if to contradict her, and then closed it again.

“What is your name?” Rose asked, changing the subject. “I hardly feel right calling you Beast.”

“That is what I am, so that is what you must call me. Beasts have no title,” he replied bitterly.

“My father named me Rose after the flower, but I had never seen one before—at least, not until he brought me the one from your garden. Oh, I should not have brought that up, should I? I am nervous. Are you hungry?” she asked in a rush, trying unsuccessfully to mend her blundering tongue.

The Beast lifted one weighty eyebrow. “No, but if you do not wish to be alone while you eat, I can keep you company from the rafters.”

Rose lifted a hand in protest. “I would much rather you did so down here. Stay with me . . . please?”

The Beast did not answer, but when she turned and walked over to the table, she could hear him softly padding in her wake.

Rose settled into the chair at the head of the table, while the Beast seated himself on the floor a few feet away.

“Do you eat fruit?” Rose asked, picking up a wild apple from a bowl.

“I do, though I prefer meat,” he replied.

“Perhaps you can dine with me in the future,” she offered. “With only the two of us, it should be simple for our meal times to coincide.”

He stared at her. “You are kind to suggest it, but I fear the way I eat would put you off your food.”

Rose nodded, unsure of how to reply. Instead, she focused on serving her food, aware that the Beast was scrutinizing her every move.

“You are so graceful,” he observed. “Watching you eat is like watching a dance.”

Rose blushed. “Thank you. You have very fine manners for a Beast,” she returned.

By the end of the meal, much of Rose’s apprehension regarding the Beast had vanished. He was courtly and kind, and far more gentlemanlike than most of the men in her village. If Rose could forget for a moment that

she was his prisoner and he was her keeper, she could almost find herself liking the Beast.

“Rose, if my continued presence here does not offend you, might I show you something?” he asked when it was clear she had finished her meal.

She gave him a small smile. “Restricting your company only to dinner was your idea, not mine,” she reminded him.

“Then come.”

She followed him into the corridor and to the front door. Rose had not been outside since the first day she had come to the lodge, and she breathed deeply of the fragrant air—warm and sweet with the dawning of summer—as the Beast led her outside.

“I was not sure if my promise confined me to the house,” Rose admitted as they walked around the side of the lodge.

The Beast shook his head. “You may go anywhere you like on this estate—just not the forest. It is too dangerous to venture in there alone.”

“I understand.”

Rose looked about with interest as they walked. When she had first arrived at the lodge, she had been too exhausted and distracted to pay much attention to its design. Now, she admired the smooth stone walls, the rosy clay roof, and the oriel windows that did not seem to match up with the rooms she knew were inside.

The ground was covered in a fine grass that reached to her calves, as well as an assortment of wildflowers that proliferated near the edge of the forest and decreased in density the closer they got to the lodge. The path she was walking on was nearly bare of growth, however, and had clearly been well-trod over the years.

They rounded the back of the lodge, and Rose saw glints of silver through the grass as sunlight reflected off a pond. A willow grew near one bank, but that was not where the Beast was leading her.

“This is my garden,” he said, his voice oddly gentle. “My roses. They have been my one real joy these many years.”

Rose cleared her throat, but the tightness she felt refused to abate. “They are beautiful,” she whispered, not trusting herself to speak more. Part of her hated the lovely flowers, hated herself for having requested one from her father, and hated the Beast in that moment for having been so possessive of what was after all only a plant—especially one he grew so abundantly. How



dare he demand someone's life in exchange for a flower—a single flower—which was only going to wither away regardless!

But another part of her appreciated the splendor of her namesake and noted the Beast's curiously tender expression as he gazed at his roses. His one real joy, he had said? What an odd thing for a beast to care for! Perhaps if she had lived alone in a lodge with no one to talk to or love save for some flowers, she, too, might have grown just as possessive.

*You are making excuses for him*, the first part of her argued.

*Not excuses—just understanding*, the other half refuted. *He may speak like a man, but he is only a Beast after all. One cannot expect an animal to think the same way as a human does.*

*Indeed. He is an animal. Do not forget that*, her mind warned.

Rose shook her head.

"They are beautiful," she repeated, stepping into the garden. The blossoms dazzled her eyes with their variety of colors, and their fragrances swirled about her head in a dizzying aroma. She leaned down and sniffed a large, pink rose. In addition to its thick, musky scent, she thought she detected a trace of strawberry. When she turned to smell an orange flower, however, its scent was reminiscent of honey.

Noting her puzzlement, the Beast remarked, "I grow many types of roses here, and they all smell different. Some bushes even change their scent depending on the weather or the time of day."

Rose nodded her acknowledgement and reached out to touch a petal. It was softer than a feather, and she rubbed it gently between her thumb and forefinger, marveling at its texture. The rose her father had plucked had already begun to wilt by the time it had reached her, but these were in full bloom.

She turned to ask the Beast how he had managed to grow them, but was interrupted by a loud, exultant bark.

Rose's head snapped around, but the next instant, the Beast had leapt in front of her, blocking her view and snarling a protective warning at the interloper. Even so, Rose had seen the fearless form bounding towards her, and she put out a hand to push the Beast to one side, not even caring in that moment that she had touched him nor noting his glance of surprise as he obediently moved out of the way.

"Pesk!"

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“PESK!” SHE CRIED AGAIN, dropping to her knees. The dog leapt forward and licked her eyelids and cheeks as she hugged him in her arms and tried to bury her face in his ruff. “However did you find me? You foolish hound, you should not have come,” she murmured, but the strength of her embrace told the dog she did not mean her chastisement.

“I did not say your pet could come,” the Beast grumbled, clearly displeased.

Rose glared up at him. “You did not say he could *not* come, either,” she retorted. “Besides, I *told* him not to follow me—he just never listens. That is why he is called *Pesk*.”

“If he bothers me, I will eat him,” the Beast snapped, and he stalked off. Rose stared after him, shocked.

“He does not mean it,” she comforted herself. “But if he did, it would be your own fault,” she scolded the dog. *Pesk* just panted happily—clearly unconcerned—and then licked her across the mouth.

“Yech!” Rose got to her feet, wiping dog slobber away with a disgusted groan. “Maybe I should let him eat you after all. I knew there was a reason I left you behind!”

Pesk barked, completely unperturbed by her annoyance. He knew her too well to be deceived.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari paced along the corridor, his padded feet making almost no sound. It had been a week since the dog had thrust its way into his life, and the easy familiarity Rose exhibited with the hound made Ari’s green eyes blaze with jealousy. He wanted the girl’s company all to himself, and he resented the creature’s intrusion. Envy made him cross, and just that morning, he had finally lost his temper and snapped at Rose.

“You fawn over that dog of yours, and yet you treat me like a—like an animal!” he had accused.

Rose had just stared at him, stunned by his outburst. “Well, how else should I treat you?” she had asked. “You *are* an animal.”

Ari could not contradict her, even though everything inside him had been dying to. If she knew he were human, it would ruin any chance he had that she might one day break his spell.

*She thinks I am an animal, so she does not have high expectations of me. If she learns I am a man, she would abhor me for keeping her here. At least this way, she is willing to accept my company. If I told her the truth, she would want nothing to do with me. Better to spend the rest of my life convincing her of my worth than to have her abandon me now.*

Ari growled softly, torn between the idea of revealing the truth to Rose and maintaining her impression of him as a beast. Only as the latter could Rose ever break his spell, for only by loving “the Beast” unconditionally and agreeing to marry him could she help him regain his humanity. Surely, that chance—however slim—was worth the cost to his pride?

For the fifth time that night, Ari glanced toward her door. It was past midnight—he really should go to sleep. He had enough trouble lately controlling his temper without being tired, too, but he was reluctant to leave Rose unguarded. Still, there was no point in keeping watch if it made him irritable when he was with her. He had set up precautions—he would hear if anything went amiss.

Just then, the bedroom door opened, and Rose peered blearily into the corridor.

“Beast? Pesk heard you out here. What are you doing?” she yawned.

He froze. “N–Nothing,” he stuttered, feeling like a small child caught in wrongdoing.

Rose frowned and took a step into the corridor. Her foot struck something and it skittered away, striking the rails of the banister and shattering with a loud crash

“What in the—bowls? Why are there bowls in front of my door?” she queried, bending down and picking one up off the floor.

Ari dropped his gaze, his nostrils flaring with guilt.

“Did you put these here?” Rose demanded, her bewilderment clear.

Ari was glad that his back was to the corridor window and his face was in shadow, or else she would surely have been able to see his cheeks burning underneath all his fur.

“Beast, why?”

He did not answer.

“You must have wanted to hear if I left my room,” she reasoned slowly. “But why? Were you afraid that I would try to leave in the night, now that Pesk is here and can show me the way home?”

Ari’s silence was her confirmation.

“I gave you my word that I would stay,” she bit out angrily. “Why would you trust my father’s promise, yet doubt mine?”

Shame made Ari stutter, “I did not mean to, I was just—I thought you might—”

“You thought I might foreswear myself. You thought I had no honor!”

“No, I—”

Rose did not wait for him to defend himself. With a scathing look, she spun away into her room and slammed the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, the Beast tried to apologize to Rose, but she just listened in stony silence while her soul continued to seethe. *How dare he doubt me? When have I ever given him any reason for pause?* She was not sure why the Beast’s opinion of her mattered so much, she only knew that it had stung to realize he did not trust her.

Rose refused to go out of her way to avoid his company, but she did not acknowledge the Beast or speak to him the rest of the day. Perhaps it was petty of her, but it pleased her to see him cringe out of the corner of her eye whenever she let her gaze slide past where he stood.

*Go back to the rafters,* she thought. *Leave me alone.* When he did disappear, Rose exulted.

“Come on, Pesk,” she said, but instead of venturing upstairs to explore, Rose led the way outside. A stable with empty stalls and immaculate equipment stood a few paces to one side of the lodge. After a cursory look inside, Rose made a beeline for the pond.

She stepped into the shelter made by the willow’s boughs, resting one hand against its trunk. Slowly, Rose sank down onto the silty ground and closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the bole. In her mind, she could hear the music of a comb harmonica and Darren’s soft laughter, and could almost imagine the feel of his arms around her again.

A loud splash broke the illusion, and she opened her eyes to see Pesk frolicking in the pond. Ripples of golden pollen swirled around him and clung to his fur, making Rose groan. It would be a nightmare to get off.

She closed her eyes again, and did not open them even as the sun faded in the sky and drifted behind the trees. Only when she began to shiver did she finally rise to her feet.

Pesk had fallen asleep in the grass, but he woke when he heard her stir. Together, they walked back to the lodge; once inside, she led him straight to the kitchen.

“Clean him,” Rose commanded the objects, stepping back into the corridor and closing the door firmly behind her before Pesk could realize her intention and escape.

Smiling to herself, Rose strode away to clean up for supper, pleased for the first time to have given an order.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pesk’s low growl startled Rose awake. She blinked hard and sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes and trying to focus on her dog. Pesk’s head was lifted and his eyes were fixed on the door. She knew what that meant. Anger burned away any lingering sleepiness as she climbed out of bed and threw open the door with a glare.

“What?” she demanded crossly. The Beast stood before her on his hind legs, his posture one of abashed indecision. She swallowed hard at his unexpected height, but would not let herself be cowed. “You have taken to stalking my doorframe yourself now? Bowls are not good enough anymore?”

“I—”

“You were right, you are hideous, but it is your behavior more than your looks that I cannot stand! You are unbearable. I hate you! Why can you not let me be?”

A small sound, almost a whimper, emerged from the Beast’s throat. He thrust out his paws toward her, and Rose took a defensive step back. Then she realized he was holding something out to her, and a thin cheep confirmed it.

“I found it,” the Beast said, his voice low. “It is a fledgling that broke its wing. My paws are too big and clumsy to help—I would just hurt it some more. Your hands are small and fine. I promise never to bother you again, but will you please help the bird?”

Rose swallowed down the sudden lump in her throat. She looked at the Beast, her expression contrite, but he was staring at the ground. Wordlessly, she took the fledgling from his grasp. As soon as she did, he turned and strode away.

“Beast, wait!” she called, but for the first time, he did not heed her words. Instead, he leapt over the banister and when she rushed forward to look after him, he had already disappeared from view.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rose had no idea how to set an animal’s wing. She stared at the bird, which did not bother staring back and instead pecked painfully at her hand.

“Stop that!” she winced. Hastening back to her room, Rose snatched up a washcloth and wrapped it securely around the fledgling so it could not move. Pesk padded over and sniffed at curiously at the bird, then curled back up on the bed.

“You have the instincts of a brick,” she muttered, nevertheless glad that he had no interest in turning the fledgling into a late night snack. Then again, Pesk did not seem to find even the Beast worth his fuss—except

when he sensed him lurking outside her door—so Rose supposed a little bird was hardly going to be worth the dog’s notice.

*Beast.* She felt like a beast now. He *had* apologized to her, but she had not accepted it. Then when he had come to her for help, she had said all those hurtful, horrible things to him. How could she? He was not hideous, not really. Actually, for an animal, she supposed he was rather fine. His hair was sleek and dark, and his features were muscled and well-proportioned. As for his eyes—green in the daytime, golden once night fell—they were so expressive and beautiful that she could hardly believe they belonged to a Beast at all. In them, she had seen just how deeply her words had wounded him. Now, Rose would give anything to take those words back.

“What should I do?” she asked aloud, but there was no one to give her an answer—only the fledgling cheeping pitifully in her hands. Rose looked down at it. The least she could do was try to help the bird, but Rose had no idea how to set a bone, let alone one that was covered in feathers. All she could think of was to bind the broken wing to the bird’s body so it would have a chance to heal on its own.

For that, she needed strips of cloth, but she did not want to tear the washcloth to pieces—not after it had acted so alive her first day at the lodge. Instead, she reached down and ripped off a section from the bottom of her dress, grimacing at having ruined something so fine.

“You can show your appreciation by not savaging my fingers,” Rose muttered to the bird as she removed the washcloth from around its body. She held the fledgling facing away from her so that its beak could not reach her hands, and part of her was struck by how calmly she was handling the creature. Even now as she wrapped its wing tight to its body, there was none of the anxiety she used to feel when the birds would swoop down to hear her sing. Rose supposed that after the Beast, no other creature could seem quite so daunting.

Having finished wrapping the bird, Rose poured a little water from her pitcher into the lid of her hairpin box so the bird would have something to drink. Then Rose carefully placed both lid and invalid in the empty washbowl, nestled the washcloth around the bird to help keep it comfortable, and settled the bowl near the fire so the fledgling would stay warm.

“There,” she said, pleased with the result. “That should keep you for tonight. Tomorrow, I will ask the kitchen to find you some seed or worms or

whatever it is you eat.”

Yawning, Rose crawled back into bed, shoving Pesk roughly aside from where he had been lying in her spot.

*And tomorrow, she mused as she drifted back to sleep, I will apologize to the Beast.*



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THAT PROVED EASIER SAID THAN DONE. The Beast did not appear all morning, and Rose could hardly blame him for wanting to dodge her crippling tongue. She considered calling for him to come down as she had done before, but quickly rejected the idea—after all, he was only leaving her alone as she had asked. No, she would seek him out herself.

First, though, Rose had to feed the fledgling, which was professing its hunger in loud, plaintive cries. Carrying the bird into the kitchen, she asked the objects there to find her whatever the fledgling needed to eat; a bowl, two cloths, and a large spoon soared out a rickety door that opened to reveal the outside. Pesk eyed the objects with interest, but did not bark—he, too, had grown accustomed to the magic that governed the lodge.

A short time later, the objects returned. The spoon was now bent and covered in dirt, the cloths were stained with juice, and the bowl was

brimming over with berries and worms.

Rose looked at its contents and felt her gorge rise as the thought of having to touch the squiggling worms. She wanted very much to delegate the task, but the Beast had asked *her* to help the bird. After all her unwarranted insults, feeding the feeble creature was the least she could do.

"I hope you appreciate this," she muttered, groaning a little as she picked up a worm that was trying to escape from the bowl. It wriggled within her hand, making her shudder.

The fledgling threw back its head and accepted the offering with greedy enthusiasm. A second later, it thanked her with a poop, opened its beak again, and cheeped for more.

Rose eyed the unwelcome gift in dismay. "Lovely."

Gritting her teeth, she picked up the fecal sac delicately between two fingers, relieved to find that it did not break. *Less messy than a chamber pot*, she decided as she tossed the sac out the door.

Only after the fledgling had consumed half the bowl of food did it finally close its beak in satisfaction.

"About time," Rose remarked, placing a trencher over the dish to keep the remaining worms from escaping until it was time to feed the bird again. She hoped the fledgling would stay sated for a while as she settled it in a large pot near the hearth where it could stay warm and safe. That taken care of, Rose's thoughts turned once more to the Beast.

*I do not want to shout up at him again, but how else can I apologize?* she mused as she poured a pitcher of water into the sink and washed her hands. *I guess the only way is to go up there myself. But how?*

A final glance told her the fledgling was well content for the moment, so Rose let Pesk outside to do his morning business, summoned her courage, and went to search out the Beast.

*He comes down through the hall where we eat*, she recalled. *If he can control that room, perhaps I can, too.*

Feeling a tad foolish, she instructed the hall, "Let me into the rafters as you do the Beast."

Noiselessly, the ceiling began to ripple and change before her eyes from stone into wood. Stairs descended from the far corner and came to rest upon the floor with a dull thud.

Plucking a rushlight from its nip on the wall, Rose took a deep breath and began to climb the steps. The top opened up into a triangular space

slightly shorter than she was with support beams crisscrossing as far as she could see. Rose ducked her head to avoid hitting it on the roof and wondered why the Beast chose to lurk in such a place when even on all fours, he would be forced to crouch.

The rushlight illuminated only a few feet in front of her at a time, and Rose tried not to wonder if there were bats or other such creatures residing there. Dust clung to the air, tickling her nose until she thought she might sneeze. Stifling the urge, she saw that the Beast's repeated passage had swept a span of boards clean, and these she followed as she tiptoed across the room.

Rose reached the far side, which was walled save for an archway leading to the rafters above the corridor. She peered through but could see nothing beyond except thin slivers of light seeping through the floor boards.

"Beast?" Rose softly called and heard him stir. Feeling a little braver, she stepped through the archway and toward the sound, her rushlight dimly allowing her to make out the Beast curled up in the thin space between two bracing beams. As she neared, Rose saw that the fit was so tight that the boards actually pressed against his flesh. She knew he could not be comfortable.

"Rose?" he questioned, turning to face her with eyes that gleamed gold in the dark. "What are you doing here?"

She opened her mouth to reply, but the dust in the air made her sneeze instead.

"Looking for you," she sniffed when she had recovered. "I said some horrible things to you, and I am very, very sorry."

He turned his head away. "You did not say anything that was not true."

"But it *was* not true! You are not hideous. You are . . . different, is all. I was mad at you, but that does not justify the things I said. I do not hate you. Truly, I do not."

"Of course you do. I took you from your home, your loved ones, and even after you sacrificed all of that, I still doubted your word that you would stay. You have every right to loathe me."

"But I do not!" Rose crouched down next to the Beast and tentatively placed one hand on his massive shoulder. He flinched at her touch, and she drew her hand away, but replaced it after a moment in firm decision. "You are gracious and kind, and you have treated me far, far better than I have

treated you. If you can put aside the things I said last night, I will put aside the way I came to be here. We will start anew as friends.”

“You do not have to do that,” the Beast protested roughly.

“I know. I want to.”

He turned his head to look at her again. “I would like to be your friend, Rose.”

The child-like hope in his voice made her smile and loosened the tight feeling in her chest. “Then we are.”

He smiled back, and this time she did not mind the way his large teeth gleamed in the rushlight. The beams creaked as the Beast shifted to see her better, and dust drifted down around them. Rose sneezed again.

The Beast frowned in concern. “You should not be up here. The rafters are no place for you.”

“They are no place for you, either. I will go down only if you come with me,” she declared.

He nodded. “Very well. I am going to get up,” he warned. “Stand back.”

Rose stepped away as the Beast rose stiffly to his feet, his knees bent at sharp angles to avoid hitting his back on the rafters.

“Why do you like to stay up here?” Rose asked as she led the way back to the hall. “You have such beautiful rooms! Surely you would enjoy them better than this dusty space.”

“I did not want to intrude on anywhere you might wish to go,” he admitted.

“You do not intrude,” she affirmed, blinking against the sudden light as she left the rafters. Once the Beast had joined her downstairs, the steps retracted back into the ceiling and its wooden construction promptly reverted back to stone.

“I wish I had known before now that I could change this room,” she remarked wistfully. “My first day here, I found a chamber full of musical instruments that I really liked, but it has not chosen to reappear.”

“You can turn this into your music room if you like—whenever you like. In fact, I hope you do.” The Beast shuffled one paw along the ground, as though embarrassed by what he was about to say. “Your voice when you sang that day was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard.”

“Then I must sing for you again,” Rose offered with a smile. “But right now, I need to check on our patient.”

As soon as Rose entered the kitchen, the bird began to chirp at her hungrily.

“Again?” she asked, bemused. “I just fed you!”

“I have watched the wild ones for many years now,” the Beast said from the doorway. “The babies eat all the time, and the fledglings nearly as often.”

“You like birds, then?” Rose asked as she retrieved the bowl of food.

“Well enough.”

Rose dropped a large berry into the bird’s mouth and picked up the resulting sac, setting it aside in an empty dish.

“Why are you standing so far away, then?” she asked. “Come closer and see what you saved.”

“I will scare it,” the Beast deferred.

Rose shook her head. “Baby animals tend not to have much sense. I doubt it knows yet to be afraid of you. Come,” she coaxed.

The Beast hesitated, then slowly drew near. The fledgling hardly seemed to notice his approach, its head cocked back and its insistent cheeps demanding only one thing—food.

“Here,” Rose said, holding a plump blackberry out to the Beast.

“Why are you giving it to *me*?” he asked, puzzled. Still, he held up one paw, and she dropped the berry into his palm.

“You found it, you feed it,” Rose stated.

Casting her a dubious look, the Beast drew even closer so that his paw hovered above the bird’s head. A slight tilt, and the berry fell into the fledgling’s open mouth.

“I did it!” he declared in a tone that sounded both astonished and proud.

Rose laughed. “Yes, you did! Again.”

This time, she handed him a worm. The Beast turned his paw so that the worm dangled within range of the bird’s beak. The fledgling grabbed the end of the worm and sucked the whole thing into its mouth.

The Beast chuckled in delight, and Rose stared at him, shocked. She had not known the Beast could laugh. It was a deep, rumbling sound, and judging by the look on the Beast’s face, it had surprised him, too.

“There, you see, not so scary after all,” Rose smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once the bird was finally full, the Beast excused himself to go hunting, and Rose took the opportunity to finish exploring the rooms upstairs. She had avoided new chambers ever since she had encountered the Dark Place, but today seemed a good day for facing her fears—especially now that she had Pesk by her side. Heart pounding, Rose opened the door to the room next to hers, but its contents proved anticlimactic—merely another sleeping solar. The chamber after was much the same. The third and last room in the corridor, however, was something else altogether.

Mirrors greeted Rose on every side as she stepped through the door. Even the ceiling and the floor were mirrors, reflecting every angle of her aspect. Wavy blonde hair reached midway down her back, and Rose noticed that some streaks seemed to shine more golden than the rest, like rays of a noontide sun. Her skin was lightly tanned from years spent outside, yet somehow still free of freckles or coarseness. Her body was lithe but strong, its curves and hollows accentuated by the cut of her azure dress. Her posture was straight and unaffected a youth spent working on her family's farm, and made Rose appear taller than she actually was.

"If only Darren could see me now," she murmured, thinking how his eyes would alight to see her so bedecked—blue was his favorite color.

Rose crossed further into the room, and all of a sudden, her reflections vanished and she found herself back in her home. Pesk's sharp yip echoed her surprise.

"Father!" Rose cried in amazement. He was sitting at the table repairing the handle of a sickle. Aunt Tess stood nearby, stuffing pastries for a meal. Neither of them looked up at Rose's exclamation. "Father?" Rose reached a hand to touch him, but encountered an invisible barrier before she could.

Puzzled, Rose slid her hands along the hard surface, then crouched down and felt a sharp edge where it joined with the floor. A tear trickled down one cheek as she realized she was not in her house after all, but was merely witnessing a scene in the mirrors—so clear and lifelike, she had thought it was real.

"She seems big for a newborn," Aunt Tess spoke, startling Rose. Swiftly, she stood up and gazed at the image of her aunt, desperate to hear her speak again.

"Rose was born late, and the journey here took some time," Mercer commented blandly. Hearing her father's voice seemed to shatter something within Rose, and a flood of misery and homesickness washed through her.

Lost in a tide of emotion, Rose sought to devour every detail of her family, noticing for the first time that Mercer's face was less lined than she remembered, and his hair had no grey. Her aunt, too, looked far younger than she recalled.

"Tell me again how she got those scars on her face," Aunt Tess demanded, fixing Mercer with a piercing gaze. Rose's hands flew up to her cheeks.

Her father replied in an offhand tone, "I told you already. On our journey here, I set her basket down so I could buy some provisions, and all of a sudden, she began to wail. I turned around to see a large crow standing on her face with its beak in her hair—you know how it shines in the sun, and crows like sparkly things. Anyway, I chased the bird away, but it gouged her cheeks when it took flight."

Aunt Tess snorted, her expression clearly skeptical. "She is lucky it did not gouge out an eye. Still, crows aside, her hair does shine quite brilliantly. It is strange that Rose has such golden locks when yours are so dark, and your wife's hair was red."

"I seem to recall that Katara's mother was blonde."

Before Aunt Tess could answer, the scene faded, and Rose was left staring at her own reflections once more.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“NO!” SHE GASPED, desperate to reclaim the vision of her family. Yet no matter how much she ordered the room to show them to her—no matter how many times she opened and closed the door—she could not get the mirrors to display anything other than her reflection.

That night as she cuddled next to Pesk, Rose replayed the scene over and over in her mind, memorizing every detail of her family’s faces and pondering the questions her aunt had raised—questions that Rose had never thought to ask before.

She awakened at first light and leaving Pesk slumbering on her bed, hastened to the Mirror Room. As before, her reflections surrounded her as she stepped into the room, but the instant her feet reached the middle of the chamber, her likenesses vanished and another scene took their place.

Dense trees surrounded her on all sides, the afternoon sun scarcely able to seep through the thick foliage and reach the forest floor. Rose frowned—



she wanted to see her family, not landscape!

“How far should we go?” Chase’s voice spoke from behind her, and Rose whipped around to see her sisters traversing a thin forest path. They were walking close together and shooting quick, nervous glances at the trees. Rose drank in the sight of her sisters, noting with dismay their drawn faces and the dark shadows under their eyes.

“I told Father we would be in town until evening. We can keep walking for a while longer,” Adara replied

“You know we are not supposed to be here,” Chase said. “He will be furious if he finds out.”

“Looking for Rose was your idea.”

“I know,” Chase shrugged. “I just thought there might be some clue, some trail she may have left for us to find. It seems so hopeless now. I mean, Father and Darren have already scoured the woods—if they could not find her, how can we?”

“We are her sisters. We cannot give up hope.”

“You make it sound so easy, but our whole village thinks she is dead.”

Adara rounded on Chase. “Never say that! Never believe that! Rose is alive. She has to be.”

Chase shrank back, her eyes wide. “I want to believe you, you know I do! But sometimes . . . sometimes I cannot. What if she is dead and no one ever knows it—no one ever sings the song of mourning for her?” her voice broke.

Adara drew her sister into her arms, and together they wept. Rose found herself crying, too, and wished with all her heart that she could reach through the mirror to comfort them. “I am alive! I am well! Do not worry for me,” she sobbed, but they could not hear her.

The scene ended all too soon, leaving Rose feeling empty and alone. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she headed toward her bedroom, but pulled up short in surprise. The Beast was just leaving her chamber, holding the fledgling in one paw.

His eyes widened at the sight of her tear-streaked face, but tactfully he ignored it, nodding instead toward the bird. “I heard it squalling and wanted to see if you needed help. Your door was open, but you were not there, so I figured I would try to feed it on my own,” he explained.

Rose nodded. “I—I will join you in moment,” she said, sniffing.

The Beast nodded. “Take as much time as you need.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari forced himself not to look up as Rose and Pesk entered the kitchen. Instead, he concentrated on spearing a berry with one claw. Having succeeded, he held it out to the bird, who pulled the fruit off quickly and then begged for more. It pleased Ari to feed such a small, fragile creature and not have it cower away from him in fear.

He sensed Rose squatting down beside him and risked a look at her out of the corner of his eye. Her nose was still red and her eyes were puffy, but otherwise she looked composed.

“What did you see?” Ari asked, his gaze ostensibly fixed on the bird.

Rose was silent for a long moment. “My sisters looking for me. They fear I am dead.”

Ari swallowed and ducked his head. Her family’s misery was his fault. Was Rose regretting her offer of friendship now?

“Is—is what I saw real?” she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Ari nodded. “The mirrors show what was and what is, and possibly what will be—usually choosing scenes that are somehow important to the viewer. In my experience, they have always been true.”

Rose did not reply, just reached into the bowl and picked up a large raspberry, feeding it absently to the fledgling.

“Rose,” Ari said, reaching out one paw and carefully turning her face towards his own. It was the first time he had deliberately touched her, and in spite of Pesk’s warning growl, Ari could not help the thrill that rushed through him at the contact.

Rose met his gaze without flinching, her blue eyes boring into his in a way that made his breath catch.

“Rose,” he repeated, “the Mirror Room can be enticing, but you must be careful. It is not good to spend too much time dwelling on wants beyond your reach. Believe me, I know.”

She cocked a curious brow. “Really? What sort of things do *you* want?”

Ari drew back, afraid to answer. What did he want? His family . . . his throne . . . a chance to meet his younger brothers . . . to finally look human again . . . . The list went on and on.

“A friend,” he said at last.

Rose blinked at him, the expression in her eyes ranging from surprise to compassion. "Well, you have one now," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next afternoon, Rose and Pesk were coming down to dinner when the Beast stopped them at the foot of the stairs.

"I thought we might do things a little differently today," he said, appearing oddly nervous as he shifted from side to side. "I have prepared something special for you."

His behavior intrigued Rose. "What is it?"

"Come with me."

He led her to the hall and opened the door, then gestured her inside.

Gone was the resplendent chamber with its long trestle table and roaring fireplace. Instead, Rose stepped onto rolling dunes of black sand. A white sun spread its warmth from high overhead, and a cobalt blue sky stretched in all directions, touching down upon the waves of an azure ocean.

"The sea!" Rose gasped, running toward it and dunking her hands into the water. Pesk echoed her, prancing about the froth in delighted abandon. "It is so cold!" She brought one hand up to her mouth and tentatively licked a fingertip. "And salty!"

Eagerly, she kicked off her shoes and gathered up her skirts, striding knee-deep into the waves.

"My father used to tell me stories about the sea!" she called to the Beast, who was watching her from the doorway. "I never imagined it would look so vast. And the sound!" Rose listened in wonder to the crashing of waves upon the shore and the dull roaring of swells that never ceased, like the swift susurrations of her heart.

"It pleases you," the Beast said with a happy growl.

"Oh, yes!" Rose laughed. "Though I suppose I am not being very proper, am I?" she indicated her exposed knees with a grin.

"I do not mind, and there is no one else here to care," the Beast replied.

Her smile faltered. "Yes, I know."

In her mind, Rose could almost hear Chase's teasing comments and Adara's scandalized rebukes at her wanton behavior, and she wished more than anything that they were there to share this experience with her. But the

Beast was right, dwelling on what she could not have only made her sad. Better to enjoy this moment while it lasted.

More somber now, she stepped back onto the beach. Pesk joined after a moment, spraying her with glistening droplets as he shook the ocean from his fur.

The Beast was now no longer standing by the door, but had instead moved over to a scarlet sheet that was lying in sharp contrast upon the black sand. Steaming tureens, bowls of fruit, and dishes of meat announced the Beast's intention. Rose smiled at his picturesque gesture.

"Now this is a delight. Whatever gave you the idea?" she asked, settling down onto the cloth.

"I read something similar once in a book, and I wanted to do it for you," he replied, sitting down as well.

Rose gaped at him. "You can read?"

He nodded. "Of course. One of the rooms upstairs often becomes a library. It has many wonderful books. I will show you some of my favorites if you like."

Rose looked away. "I have seen it. But unlike you, I cannot read."

"Really?" the Beast sounded intrigued. "How come your tutor did not teach you?"

Rose gave a derisive laugh. "Tutor? I am a peasant! Neither I nor my sisters can read. My father and aunt can—their parents ran a mercantile, and it was necessary to keep records. Now that they are farmers, though, there is no need. Besides, even if I could read, only nobles can afford to buy a book for pleasure!"

The Beast listened to her expound, his expression unreadable. Beneath his weighty gaze, Rose felt herself unexpectedly flushing. She busied herself filling her plate so she would not have to look at him.

"Would you like me to teach you?" the Beast offered after a long pause.

Rose felt her pulse quicken at the invitation. "You would do that?" she breathed.

He nodded, his green eyes shining. "It would be my pleasure."

The knowledge that he could read and was willing to teach her both excited and bewildered Rose. How was it that a Beast—however magical—could think and act so much like a human?

"Beast, did you—were you—once a man?" she blurted out as an idea abruptly occurred to her.

The Beast tensed, then slowly relaxed again. "I have never been a man," he answered in flat tone.

"Oh." Rose was perplexed. "A fairy?"

"No."

"Surely not a ghastly!"

"Never!" the Beast snarled. "I am what you see."

"But you seem so human!"

Now it was the Beast who looked away. "It is kind of you to say so. Few ever see me as anything but a beast."

Rose reached out and laid one hand upon his paw. "I am learning you are much more than that," she said softly.

The Beast gazed at her, and once again, Rose was struck by the emotion in his vivid green eyes.

"Rose, I—I want to ask you something. Could you—would you . . ."

His voice abruptly faltered, and he ducked his head away.

Rose gazed at the Beast, fascinated by his strange behavior. "Could I what?"

His voice was the merest whisper, "Marry me?"

Rose jerked back with a start, knocking into her plate with her hand and tipping its contents onto the sand.

"Marry you?"

The question confused and alarmed her. How could the Beast ask her that? Or had that, too, been in the book he had read—a picnic on the beach and then a proposal to follow? She hoped so—otherwise, his query was too disturbing even to contemplate. He had just admitted he was only an animal, after all!

Rose's mind flashed to Darren, who for all his talk about a life together, had never actually asked to marry him. *He* should have been the one to pose that question, not the Beast!

Anger suffused her cheeks with a rosy bloom, but she battled it down, remembering afresh that for all the Beast's kindness, he was still her captor. Though he had only ever been kind to her, there was much she did not know about him. She did not want to risk arousing his wrath.

"No, Beast. I cannot," she declined as evenly as she could. "What you ask is impossible."

He dropped his eyes and dipped his head in a curt nod. "Of course. You are quite right—forgive me for being so foolish." Abruptly, he rose to his

feet. I must go now. Enjoy your meal.”

He turned away so fast that he almost stepped on Pesk, who was lounging nearby. Rose stared after the Beast as he vanished out the door, her heart twisting at the unhappiness she had heard in his voice.

“In spite of everything, I pity him,” she murmured to her pet. “It is as if he wants to be more than he is—though of course, he can never be. How sad that one with the heart of a man should be bound to the form of a beast!”

## EPILOGUE



“YOU CERTAINLY TOOK YOUR TIME,” Moraga rebuked, not bothering to turn around.

Liliath frowned at her thankless welcome and carefully placed the parcel she was carrying on the large stone slab in the middle of the cave.

“Well, what did you expect?” she retorted. “I had to journey on foot after all.”

Not getting to fly still vexed Liliath, but that was the price of their scheme—no one must see it was a fairy who was pilfering magical artifacts. Of course, if the ghastly would just allow her to use magic, she could make such trips almost instantly and with no one the wiser! But Liliath understood why Moraga insisted she conserve her power—even now, it blazed within Liliath stronger than ever, thanks to her three years’ dedicated preservation. By the time the ghastly’s spell on the princess came to

fruition, Liliath would have enough magic stored to demolish any foe that attempted to interfere with their plan.

“Spare me your excuses,” Moraga sneered, turning around. “You were late because you insisted on sparing that man’s life and nearly got caught as a consequence.”

Liliath stiffened, and her eyes darted to the old maritime spy glass leaning against an outcropping of rock. As long as Moraga knew where to command its gaze, the glass let the ghastly see whatever was happening there. She had been watching her again!

“I promised to serve you. I never promised to kill for you,” Liliath snapped.

Moraga’s silver gaze was piercing. “What if I had asked that of you? Would you have kept your pledge and obeyed?”

Liliath had wondered the same thing, but she knew better than to say so. “I am a fairy. Fairies do not break their word.”

“Ah, but you are no mere fairy,” Moraga replied, her eyes boring into Liliath’s as though she could see through to her very soul. Liliath lifted her chin and held her gaze, and at last the ghastly gave a small smirk of satisfaction—apparently approving of whatever it was she had found there. Striding over to where the parcel lay, Moraga uncapped the leather case Liliath had brought and reverently removed the artifact inside.

“The Luck of Ædenhill,” she breathed, holding the glass aloft so that the dim torchlight refracted through the transparent cup, illuminating the gilded scrollwork and tendrils of design decorating its length. In spite of having been fashioned centuries before, the ornate glass was completely unscathed, its ethereal beauty contrasting sharply with the ghastly’s gnarled hand.

“It still seems strange that so many of our races’ ancient artifacts have survived,” Liliath mused. “My parents told me our family’s Focuser was one of the few to have endured the ravages of time.”

Moraga scowled and replaced the cup in its protective case. “Oh, others have survived all right—they were just hidden away from their proper owners. Humans stole much of our heritage, and what they did not steal, they were given *voluntarily*,”—she spat the word—“like when your parents tried to gift away the Focuser that should have been *your* birthright.”

“They were just trying to help the kingdom,” Liliath replied, knowing she ought to defend her family, even though she felt the exact same way about their choice as Moraga did.



Sensing weakness, the ghastly pressed her point.

“Yet was the kingdom grateful for their aid? Did King Derik thank your parents for their priceless offering? No! He was greedy and undeserving, just like the rest of his depraved line—miserly, murderous brutes who think only of themselves! But you and I will break their cycle of carnage.”

The ghastly’s eyes lit up with manic glee, and she caressed the leather case in her hands as she spoke. Listening to her rant, Liliath was once more certain that Moraga’s hatred of the Natharian royalty stemmed from a far deeper source than the ghastly had cared to confide. Not that Liliath had much interest in what her reasons were—all that mattered was that the ghastly kept her word to release Ari from his curse.

Her tirade finished, Moraga walked over to an alcove and placed the case alongside the other artifacts they had accumulated over the last few years. She stared at them and murmured, “So much of our heritage has been forgotten, so much of the ancient lore has been lost. The enchantment we are composing is greater than any attempted in modern memory . . . but only because no one believes what we seek to do is possible. They have forgotten, you see. There are no more children for ghashtlies to pass down their knowledge to, and the fairies have long since abandoned the old practices—more obsessed with honor and minor moralities than in doing what is right for their kind. Their narrow-minded principles have nearly destroyed us! But I—I remember the greater morality at play, and I have resurrected the old methods. For you and me, convoluting the laws of life is not impossible—merely difficult. All it takes is patience, the right ingredients, and a little Luck.”

The fervor in Moraga’s voice made Liliath look away. Her parents would be horrified by the decision she had made to ally with the ghastly, but they had left her no other option. She *had* to save Ari. If Moraga’s plan worked, kingdoms would fall and a new one would rise, but Liliath cared nothing for any of it—breaking Ari’s spell was all that mattered to her.

“How many more do we have to gather?” she asked.

Moraga smiled, causing one lip to crack. “Just a few. I will send you to collect them soon, but right now, we must turn our attention to other things.”

Tearing her eyes away from the artifacts, the ghastly retrieved the book she had been poring over when Liliath had arrived and carried it over to the

stone slab for the girl to see. Laying it open, she pointed a long, knobby finger at one page.

Liliath peered at the passage she had indicated. The ink was faded and the parchment torn, but she could still make out the words:

*When Ithikor (soon to be called The Conqueror) and the  
Fairy Matriarch Erse shook hands upon concluding their  
treaty, Erse—a great Seer—prophesized the following:*

*With fairy magic and human lives*

*You win peace*

*You keep peace*

*Both land and kingdoms thrive*

*But when the line of Ithikor fails*

*War takes you*

*War breaks you*

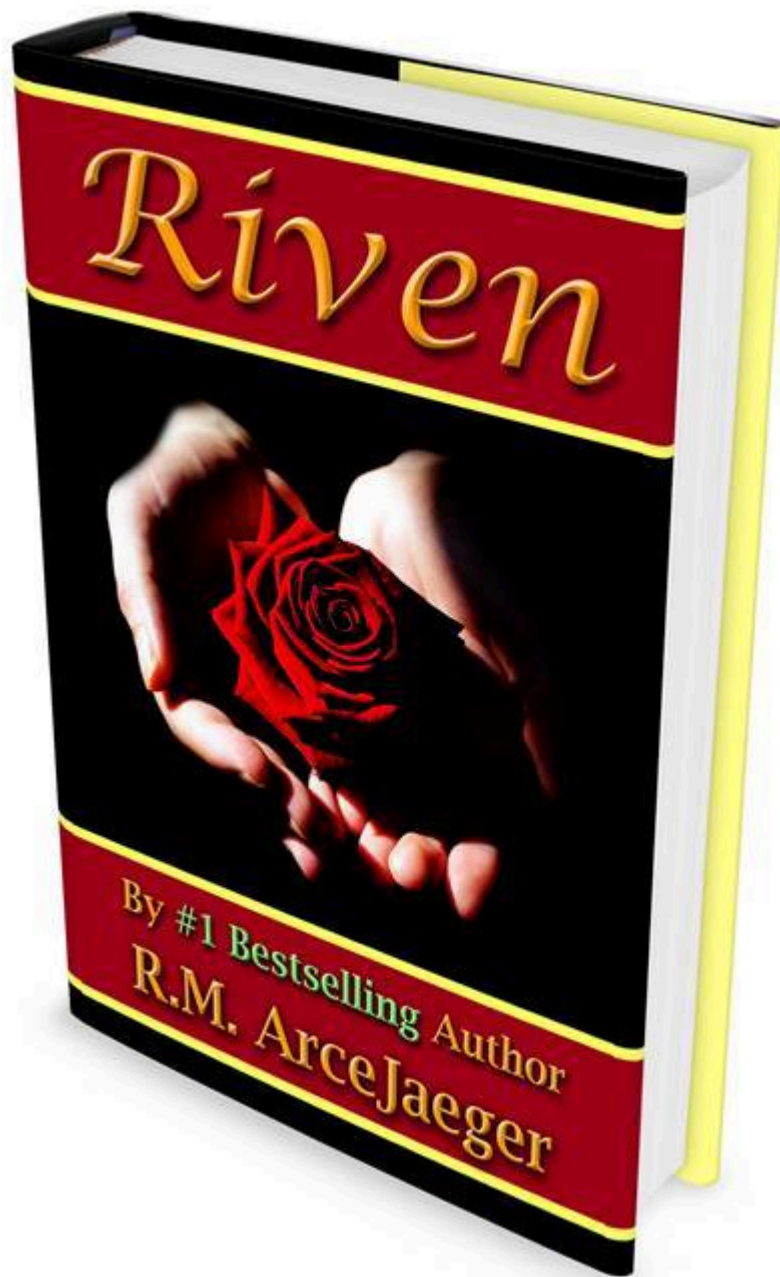
*Only chaos prevails*

*Not even hope survives.*

“The princess is the last of Ithikor’s line,” Moraga chortled. “Her father, the King of Nathar, knows this and fears the realization of the prophecy—but he does not fear it enough yet to ally with us in our plan. We must help him to accept our will over war.” Black ichor oozed from Moraga’s cracked lip as she grinned. “It is time to sow a little discord.”



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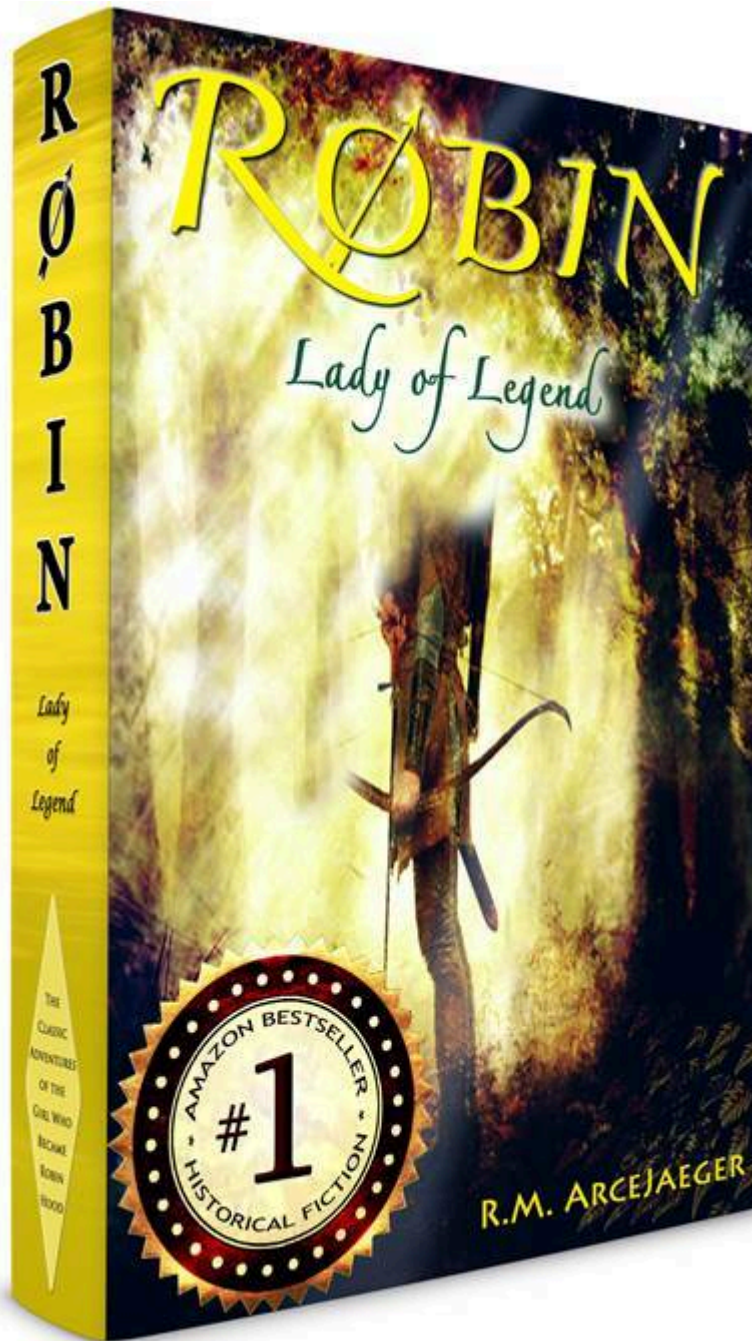
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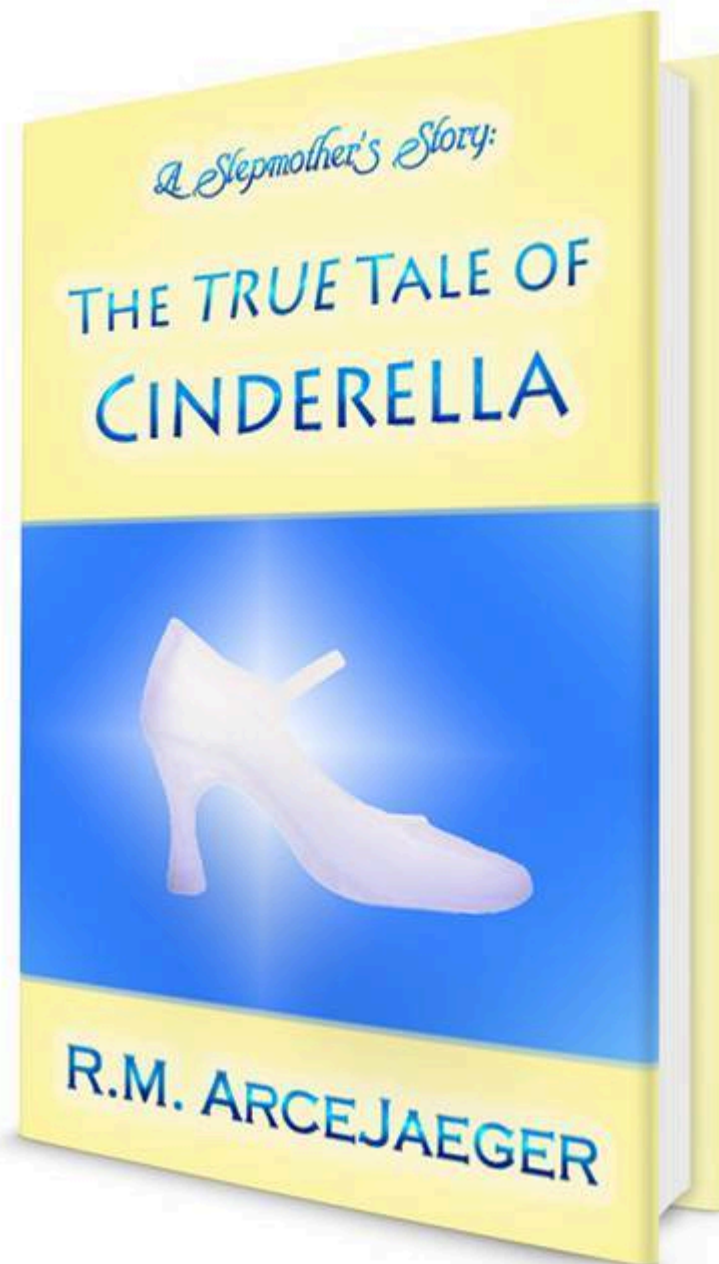
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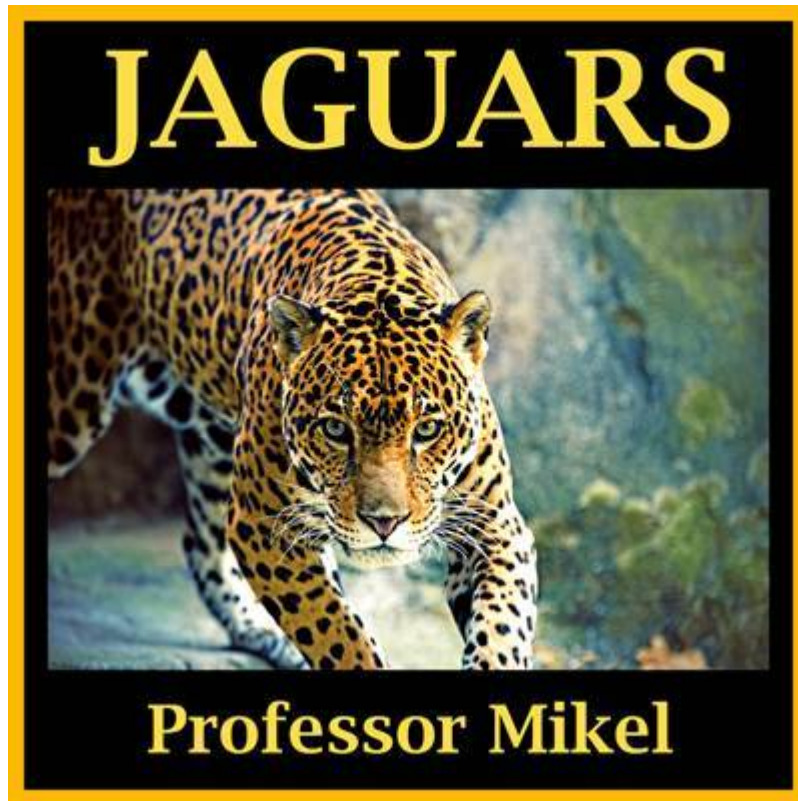




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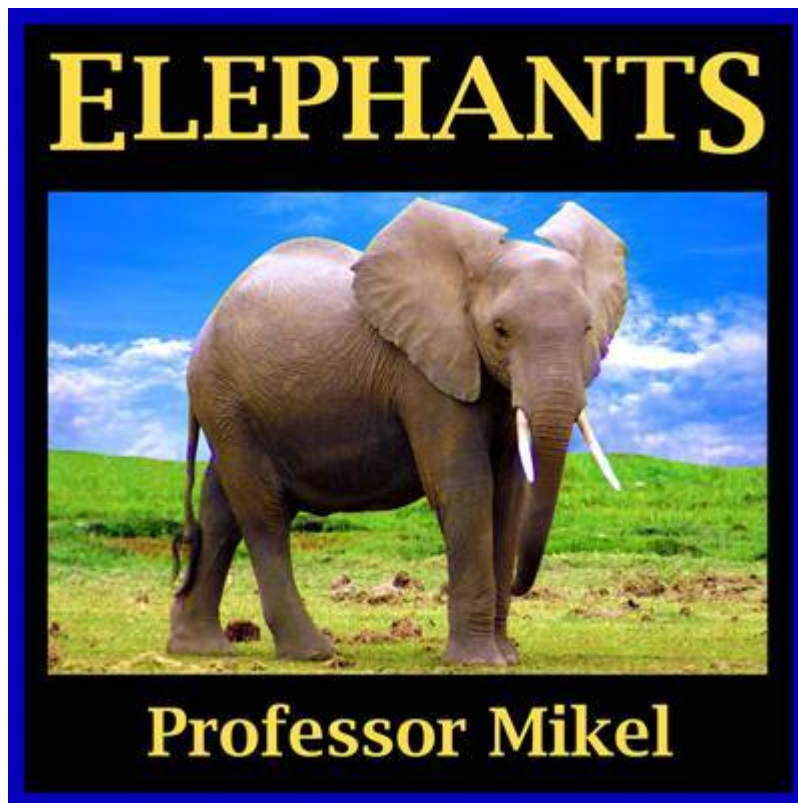
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